

"He bowed coldly to the man who was already greeting Berenice." [*Page 68*

BERENICE

By

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CHAPTER I

THE WOMAN

"YOU may not care for the play," Ellison said, eagerly. "You are of the old world, and Isteinism to you will simply spell chaos and vulgarity. But the woman! well, you will see her! I don't want to prejudice you by praises which you would certainly think extravagant! I will say nothing."

Matravers smiled gravely as he took his seat in the box and looked out with some wonder at the ill-lit, half-empty theatre.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I am very much out of place here, yet do not imagine that I bring with me any personal bias whatever. I know nothing of the play, and

Isteinism is merely a phrase to me. To-night I have no individuality. I am a critic."

"So much depends," Ellison remarked, "upon the point of view. I am afraid that you are the last man in the world to have any sympathy with the decadent."

"I do not properly understand the use of the word 'decadent,'" Matravers said. "But you need not be alarmed as to my attitude. Whatever my own gods may be, I am no slave to them. Isteinism has its devotees, and whatever has had humanity and force enough in it to attract a following must at least demand a respectful attention from the Press. And to-night I am the Press!"

"I am sorry," Ellison remarked, glancing out into the gloomy well of the theatre with an impatient frown, "that there is so bad a house to-night. It is depressing to play seriously to a handful of people!"

"It will not affect my judgment," Matravers said.

"It will affect her acting, though," Ellison replied gloomily. "There are times when, even to us who know her strength, and are partial to her, she appears to act with difficulty,—to be encumbered with all the diffidence of the amateur. For a whole scene she will be little better than a stick. The change, when it comes, is like a sudden fire from Heaven! Something flashes into her face, she becomes inspired, she holds us breathless, hanging upon every word; it is then one realizes that she is a genius."

"Let us hope," Matravers said, "that some such moment may visit her to-night. One needs some compensation for a dinnerless evening, and such surroundings as these!"

He turned from the contemplation of the dreary, half-empty auditorium with a faint shudder. The theatre was an ancient and unpopular one. The hall-mark of failure and poverty was set alike upon the tawdry and faded hangings, the dust-eaten decorations

and the rows of bare seats. It was a relief when the feeble overture came to an end, and the curtain was rung up. He settled himself down at once to a careful appreciation of the performance.

Matravers was not in any sense of the word a dramatic critic. He was a man of letters; amongst the elect he was reckoned a master in his art. He occupied a singular, in many respects a unique, position. But in matters dramatic, he confessed to an ignorance which was strictly actual and in no way assumed. His presence at the New theatre on that night, which was to become for him a very memorable one, was purely a matter of chance and good nature. The greatest of London dailies had decided to grant a passing notice to the extraordinary series of plays, which in flightier journals had provoked something between the blankest wonderment and the most boisterous ridicule. Their critic was ill—Matravers, who had at

first laughed at the idea, had consented after much pressure to take his place. He felt himself from the first confronted with a difficult task, yet he entered upon it with a certain grave seriousness, characteristic of the man, anxious to arrive at and to comprehend the true meaning of what in its first crude presentation to his senses seemed wholly devoid of anything pertaining to art.

The first act was almost over before the heroine of the play, and the actress concerning whose merits there was already some difference of opinion, appeared. A little burst of applause, half hearted from the house generally, enthusiastic from a few, greeted her entrance. Ellison, watching his companion's face closely, was gratified to find a distinct change there. In Matravers' altered expression was something more than the transitory sensation of pleasure, called up by the unexpected appearance of a very beautiful

woman. The whole impassiveness of that calm, almost marble-still face, with its set, cold lips, and slightly wearied eyes, had suddenly disappeared, and what Ellison had hoped for had arrived. Matravers was, without doubt, interested.

Yet the woman, whose appearance had caused a certain thrill to quiver through the house, and whose coming had certainly been an event to Matravers, did absolutely nothing for the remainder of that dreary first act to redeem the forlorn play, or to justify her own peculiar reputation. She acted languidly, her enunciation was imperfect, her gestures were forced and inapt. When the curtain went down upon the first act, Matravers was looking grave. Ellison was obviously uneasy.

"Berenice," he muttered, "is not herself to-night. She will improve. You must suspend your judgment."



'What I have seen,' Matravers said gravely, 'I do not like.'"

Matravers fingered his programme nervously.

"You are interested in this production, Ellison," he said, "and I should be sorry to write anything likely to do it harm. I think it would be better if I went away now. I cannot be blamed if I decline to give an opinion on anything which I have only partially seen."

Ellison shook his head.

"No, I'll chance it," he said. "Don't go. You haven't seen Berenice at her best yet. You have not seen her at all, in fact."

"What I have seen," Matravers said gravely, "I do not like."

"At least," Ellison protested, "she is beautiful."

"According to what canons of beauty, I wonder?" Matravers remarked. "I hold myself a very poor judge of woman's looks, but I can at least recognise the classical and Renaissance standards. The beauty

which this woman possesses, if any, is of the decadent order. I do not recognise it. I cannot appreciate it!"

Ellison laughed softly. He had a marvellous belief in this woman and in her power of attracting.

"You are not a woman's man, Matravers, or you would know that her beauty is not a matter of curves and colouring! You cannot judge her as a piece of statuary. All your remarks you would retract if you talked with her for five minutes. I am not sure," he continued, "that I dare not warrant you to retract them before this evening is over. At least, I ask you to stay. I will run my risk of your pulverization."

The curtain rang up again, the play proceeded. But not the same play—at least, so it seemed to Matravers—not the same play, surely not the same woman! A situation improbable enough, but dramatic, had occurred at the very beginning of the second

act. She had risen to the opportunity, triumphed over it, electrified her audience, delighted Ellison, moved Matravers to silent wonder. Her personality seemed to have dilated with the flash of genius which Matravers himself had been amongst the first to recognise. The strange pallor of her face seemed no longer the legacy of ill-health; her eyes, wonderfully soft and dark, were lit now with all manner of strange fires. She carried herself with supreme grace; there was not the faintest suspicion of staginess in any one of her movements. And more wonderful than anything to Matravers, himself a delighted worshipper of the beautiful in all human sounds, was that marvellously sweet voice, so low and yet so clear, expressing with perfect art the highest and most hallowed emotions, with the least amount of actual sound. She seemed to pour out the vial of her wrath, her outraged womanhood in tones raised little above a

whisper, and the man who fronted her seemed turned into the actual semblance of an ashamed and unclean thing. Matravers made no secret now of his interest. He had drawn his chair to the front of the box, and the footlights fell full upon his pale, studious face turned with grave and absolute attention upon the little drama working itself out upon the stage. Ellison in the midst of his jubilation found time to notice what to him seemed a somewhat singular incident. In crossing the stage her eyes had for a moment met Matravers' earnest gaze, and Ellison could almost have declared that a faint, welcoming light flashed for a moment from the woman to the man. Yet he was sure that the two were strangers. They had never met—her very name had been unknown to him. It must have been his fancy.

The curtain fell upon the second and final act amidst as much applause as the sparsely

filled theatre could offer; but mingled with it, almost as the last words of her final speech had left her lips, came a curious hoarse cry from somewhere in the cheaper seats near the back of the house. It was heard very distinctly in every part; it rang out upon the deep quivering stillness which reigns for a second between the end of a play which has left the audience spellbound, and the burst of applause which is its first reawakening instinct. It was drowned in less than a moment, yet many people turned their startled heads towards the rows of back seats. Matravers, one of the first to hear it, was one of the most interested—perhaps because his sensitive ears had recognised in it that peculiar inflection, the true ring of earnestness. For it was essentially a human cry, a cry of sorrow, a strange note charged in its very hoarseness and spontaneity with an unutterable pathos. It was as though it had been actually drawn from the heart to

the lips, and long after the house had become deserted, Matravers stood there, his hands resting upon the edge of the box, and his dark face turned steadfastly to that far-away corner, where it seemed to him that he could see a solitary, human figure, sitting with bowed head amongst the wilderness of empty seats.

Ellison touched him at last upon the elbow.

"You must come with me and be presented to Berenice," he said.

Matravers shook his head.

"Please excuse me," he said; "I would really rather not."

Ellison held out a crumpled half-sheet of notepaper.

"This has just been brought in to me," he said.

Matravers read the single line, hastily written, and in pencil:—

"Bring your friend to me.—B."



"But nothing in her words or in his alluded to it."

"It will scarcely take us a moment," Ellison continued. "Don't stop to put on your coat; we are the last in the theatre now."

Matravers, whose will was usually a very dominant one, found himself calmly obeying his companion. Following Ellison, he was bustled down a long, narrow passage, across a bare wilderness of boards and odd pieces of scenery, to the door of a room immediately behind the stage. As Ellison raised his fingers to knock, it was opened from the inside, and Berenice came out wrapped from head to foot in a black satin coat, and with a piece of white lace twisted around her hair. She stopped when she saw the two men, and held out her hand to Ellison, who immediately introduced Matravers.

Again Ellison fancied that in her greeting of him there were some traces of a former knowledge. But nothing in her words or in his alluded to it.

"I am very much honoured," Matravers said simply. "I am a rare attendant at the theatre, and your performance gave me great pleasure."

"I am very glad," she answered. "Do you know that you made me wretchedly nervous? I was told just as I was going on that you had come to smash us all to atoms in that terrible *Day*."

"I came as a critic," he answered, "but I am a very incompetent one. Perhaps you will appreciate my ignorance more when I tell you that this is my first visit behind the scenes of a theatre."

She laughed softly, and they looked around together at the dimly burning gas-lights, the creaking scenery being drawn back from the stage, the woman with a brush and mop sweeping, and at that dismal perspective of holland-shrouded auditorium beyond, now quite deserted.

"At least," she said, "your impressions

cannot be mixed ones. It is hideous here."

He did not contradict her; and they both ignored Ellison's murmured compliment.

"It is very draughty" he remarked, "and you seem cold; we must not keep you here. May we—can I," he added, glancing down the stone passage, "show you to your carriage?"

She laughed softly.

"You may come with me," she said, "but our exit is like a rabbit burrow; we must go in single file, and almost on hands and knees."

She led the way, and they followed her into the street. A small brougham was waiting at the door, and her maid was standing by it. The commissionaire stood away, and Matravers closed the carriage door upon them. Her white, ungloved hand, loaded—overloaded it seemed to him—with rings, stole through the window, and he held

it for a moment in his. He felt somehow that he was expected to say something. She was looking at him very intently. There was some powder on her cheeks, which he noted with an instinctive thrill of aversion.

"Shall I tell him home?" he asked.

"If you please," she answered.

"Madam!" her maid interposed.

"Home, please," Berenice said calmly. "Good-bye, Mr. Matravers."

"Good-night."

The carriage rolled away. At the corner of the street Berenice pulled the check-string. "The Milan Restaurant," she told the man briefly.

Matravers and Ellison lit their cigarettes and strolled away on foot. At the corner of the street Ellison had an inspiration.

"Let us," he said, "have some supper somewhere."

Matravers shook his head.

"I really have a great deal of work to

do," he said, "and I must write this notice for the *Day*. I think that I will go straight home.

Ellison thrust his arm through his companion's, and called a hansom.

"It will only take us half an hour," he declared, "and we will go to one of the fashionable places. You will be amused! Come! It all enters, you know, into your revised scheme of life—the attainment of a fuller and more catholic knowledge of your fellow-creatures. We will see our fellow-creatures *en fête*."

Matravers suffered himself to be persuaded. They drove to a restaurant close at hand, and stood for a moment at the entrance looking for seats. The room was crowded.

"I will go," Ellison said, "and find the director. He knows me well, and he will find me a table."

He elbowed his way up to the further end of the apartment. Matravers remained

a somewhat conspicuous figure in the doorway looking from one to another of the little parties with a smile, half amused, half interested. Suddenly his face became grave, —his heart gave an unaccustomed leap! He stood quite still, his eyes fixed upon the bent head and white shoulders of a woman only a few yards away from him. Almost at the same moment Berenice looked up and their eyes met. The colour left her cheeks, —she was ghastly pale! A sentence which she had just begun died away upon her lips; her companion, who was intent upon the wine list, noticed nothing. She made a movement as though to rise. Simultaneously Matravers turned upon his heel and left the room.

Ellison came hurrying back in a few moments and looked in vain for his companion. As he stood there watching the throng of people, Berenice called him to him.



"Her companion, who was intent upon the wine list, noticed nothing."

"Your friend," she said, "has gone away. He stood for a moment in the doorway like Banquo's ghost, and then he disappeared."

Ellison looked vaguely bewildered.

"Matravers is an odd sort," he remarked. "I suppose it is one of the penalties of genius to be compelled to do eccentric things. I must have my supper alone."

"Or with us," she said "You know Mr. Thorndyke, don't you? There is plenty of room here."

CHAPTER II

THE DAWN

MATRAVERS stood at an open window, reading a note by the grey dawn light. Below him stretched the broad thoroughfare of Piccadilly, noiseless, shadowy, deserted. He had thrown up the window overcome by a sudden sense of suffocation, and a chill, damp breeze came stealing in, cooling his parched forehead and hot, dry eyes. For the last two or three hours he had been working with an unwonted and rare zest; it had happened quite by chance, for as a rule he was a man of regular, even mechanical habits. But to-night he scarcely knew himself,—he

had all the sensations of a man who had passed through a new and altogether unexpected experience. At midnight he had let himself into his room after that swift, impulsive departure from the Milan, and had dropped by chance into the chair before his writing-table. The sight of his last unfinished sentence, abruptly abandoned in the centre of a neatly written page of manuscript, had fascinated him, and as he sat there idly with the loose sheet in his hands, holding it so that the lamp-light might fall upon its very legible characters, an idea flashed into his brain,—an idea which had persistently eluded him for days. With the sudden stimulus of a purely mental activity, he had hastily thrown aside his outdoor garment, and had written for several hours with a readiness and facility which seemed somehow for the last few days to have been denied to him.

He had become his old self again,—the events of the evening lay already far behind. Then had come a soft knocking at the door, followed by the apologetic entrance of his servant bearing a note upon which his name was written in hasty characters with an "Immediate" scrawled, as though by an after thought, upon the left-hand corner. He had torn it open wondering at the woman's writing, and glanced at its brief contents carelessly enough,—but since then he had done no work. For the present he was not likely to do any more.

The cold breeze, acting like a tonic upon his dazed senses, awoke in him also a peculiar restlessness, a feeling of intolerable restraint at the close environment of his little room and its associations. Its atmosphere had suddenly become stifling. He caught up his cloak and hat, and walked out again into the silent street; it seemed

to him, momentarily forgetful of the hour, like a city of the dead into which he had wandered.

As he turned, from habit, towards the Park, the great houses on his right frowned down upon him lightless and lifeless. The broad pavement, pressed a few hours ago, and so soon to be pressed again by the steps of an innumerable multitude, was deserted; his own footfall seemed to awaken a strange and curiously persistent echo, as though some one were indeed following him on the opposite side of the way under the shadow of the drooping lime trees. Once he stopped and listened. The footsteps ceased too. There was no one! With a faint smile at the illusion to which he had for a moment yielded, he continued his walk.

Before him the outline of the arch stood out with gloomy distinctness against a cold, lowering background of vapourous

sky. Like a man who was still half dreaming, he crossed the road and entered the Park, making his way towards the trees. There was a spot about half-way down, where, in the afternoons, he usually sat. Near it he found two chairs, one on top of the other; he removed the upper one and sat down, crossing his legs and lighting a cigarette which he took from his case. Then in a transitory return of his ordinary state of mind he laughed softly to himself. People would say that he was going mad.

Through half-closed eyes he looked out upon the broad drive. With the aid of an imagination naturally powerful, he was passing with marvellous facility into an unreal world of his own creation. The scene remained the same, but the environment changed as though by magic. Sunshine pierced the grey veil of clouds, gay voices and laughter broke the chill silence.

The horn of a four-in-hand sounded from the corner, the path before him was thronged with men and women whose rustling skirts brushed often against his knees as they made their way with difficulty along the promenade. A glittering show of carriages and coaches swept past the railings; the air was full of the sound of the trampling of horses and the rolling of wheels. With a mental restraint of which he was all the time half-conscious, he kept back the final effort of his imagination for some time; but it came at last.

A victoria, drawn by a single dark bay horse, with servants in quiet liveries, drew up at the paling, and a woman leaning back amongst the cushions looked out at him across the sea of faces as she had indeed looked more than once. She was surrounded by handsomer women in more elaborate toilettes and more splendid equi-

pages. Her cheeks were pale, and she was undoubtedly thin. Nevertheless, to other people as well as to him, she was a personality. Even then he seemed to feel the little stir which always passed like electricity into the air directly her carriage was stayed. When she had come, when he was perfectly sure of her, and indeed under the spell of her near presence, he drew that note again from his pocket and read it.

"18, LARGE STREET., W.

"12.30.

"I told you a lie! and I feel that you will never forgive me! Yet I want to explain it. There is something I want you to know! Will you come and see me? I shall be at home until one o'clock to-morrow morning, or, if the afternoon suits you better, from 4 to 6.

"BERENICE."

A lie! Yes, it was that. To him, an

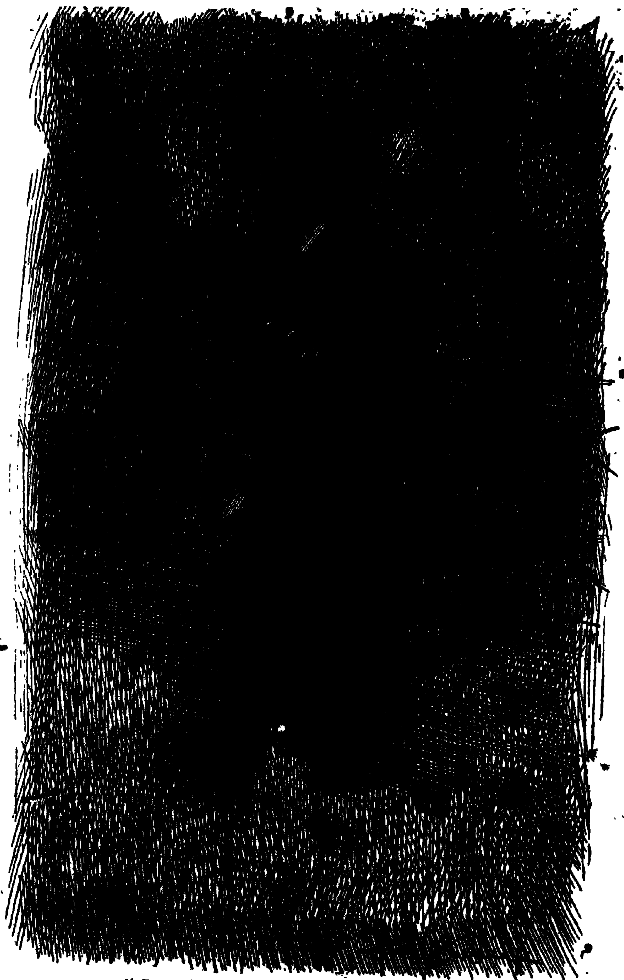
inveterate lover of truth, the offence had seemed wholly unpardonable. He had set himself to forget the woman and the incident as something altogether beneath his recollection. The night, with its host of strange, half-awakened sensations, was a memory to be lived down, to be crushed altogether. For him, doubtless, that lie had been a providence. It put a stop to any further intercourse between them,—it stamped her at once with the hall-mark of unworthiness. Yet he knew that he was disappointed; disappointment was, perhaps, a mild word. He had walked through the streets with Ellison, after that meeting with her at the theatre, conscious of an unwonted buoyancy of spirits, feeling that he had drawn into his life a new experience which promised to be a very pleasant one.

There were things about the woman which had not pleased him, but they were, on the whole, merely superficial incidents, accidents

he chose to think, of her environment. He had even permitted himself to look forward to their next meeting, to a definite continuance of their acquaintance. Standing in the doorway of the brilliantly lit Milan, he had looked in at the vivid little scene with a certain eager tolerance,—there was much, after all, that was attractive in this side of life, so much that was worth cultivating; he blamed himself that he had stood aloof from it for so long.

Then their eyes had met, he had seen her sudden start, had felt his heart sink like lead. She was a creature of common clay after all! His eyes rested for a moment upon her companion, a man well known to him, though of a class for whom his contempt was great, and with whom he had no kinship. She was like this then! It was a pity.

His cigarette went out, and a rain-drop, which had been hovering upon a leaf above him, fell with a splash upon the sheet of



"Stiff and chilled and disillusioned."

heavy white paper. He rose to his feet, stiff and chilled and disillusioned. His little ghost-world of fancies had faded away. Morning had come, and eastwards, a single shaft of cold sunlight had pierced the grey sky.

CHAPTER III

AN AFTERNOON CALL

AT ten o'clock he breakfasted, after three hours' sleep and a cold bath. In the bright yet soft spring daylight, the lines of his face had relaxed, and the pallor of his cheeks was less unnatural. He was still a man of remarkable appearance; his features were strong and firmly chiselled, his forehead was square and almost hard. He wore no beard, but a slight, black moustache only half-concealed a delicate and sensitive mouth. His complexion and his soft grey eyes were alike possessed of a singular clearness, as though they were, indeed, the indices of a temperate and well-contained life. His dress, and every movement and detail of his person,

were characterized by an extreme delibera-tion; his whole appearance bespoke a peculiar and almost feminine fastidiousness. The few appointments of his simple meal were the most perfect of their kind. A deli-cate vase of freshly cut flowers stood on the centre of the spotless table-cloth,—the hang-ings and colouring of the apartment were softly harmonious. The walls were hung with fine engravings, with here and there a brilliant little water-colour of the school of Corot; a few marble and bronze statuettes were scattered about on the mantelpiece and on brackets. There was nothing particularly striking anywhere, yet there was nothing on which the eye could not rest with pleasure.

At half-past ten he lit a cigarette, and sat down at his desk. He wrote quite steadily for an hour; at the end of that time he pinned together the result of his work, and wrote a hasty note.

"113, PICCADILLY.

"DEAR MR. HASLUP,—

"I went last night to the New theatre, and I send you my views as to what I saw there. But I beg that you will remember my absolute ignorance on all matters pertaining to the modern drama, and use your own discretion entirely as to the disposal of the enclosed. I do not feel myself, in any sense of the word, a competent critic, and I trust that you will not feel yourself under the least obligation to give to my views the weight of your journal.

"I remain,

"Yours truly,

"JOHN MATRAVERS."

His finger was upon the bell, when his servant entered, bearing a note upon a salver. Matravers glanced at the handwriting already becoming familiar to him, recognising, too, the faint odour of violets which seemed to

escape into the room as his fingers broke the seal.

"It is half-past eleven, and you have not come! Does that mean that you will not listen to me, that you mean to judge me unheard? You will not be so unkind! I shall remain indoors until one o'clock, and I shall expect you.

"BERENICE."

Matravers laid the note down, and covered it with a paper-weight. Then he sealed his own letter, and gave it, with the manuscript, to his servant. The man withdrew, and Matravers continued his writing.

He worked steadily until two o'clock. Then a simple luncheon was brought into him, and upon the tray another note. Matravers took it with some hesitation, and read it thoughtfully.

"Two o'Clock.

"You have made up your mind, then, not to come. Very well, I too am determined. If you will not come to me, I shall come to you! I shall remain in until four o'clock. You may expect to see me any time after then.

"Berenice."

Matravers ate his luncheon and pondered, finally deciding to abandon a struggle in which his was obviously the weaker position. He lingered for a while over his coffee; at three o'clock he retired for a few moments into his dressing-room, and then descending the stairs, made his way out into the street.

He had told himself only a few hours back that he would be wise to ignore this summons from a woman, the ways of whose life must lie very far indeed from his. Yet he knew that his meeting with her had affected him as nothing of the sort had ever affected



" He lingered for a while over his coffee."

him before—a man unimpressionable where women were concerned and ever devoted to, and cultivating a somewhat unnatural exclusiveness. Her first note he had been content to ignore,—she might have written it in a fit of pique—but the second had made him thoughtful. Her very persistence was characteristic. Perhaps after all she was in the right—he had arrived too hastily at an ignoble conclusion. Her attitude towards him was curiously unconventional; it was an attitude such as none of the few women with whom he had ever been brought into contact would have dreamed of assuming. But none the less it had for him a fascination which he could not measure or define,—it had awakened a new sensation, which, as a philosopher, he was anxious to probe. The mysticism of his early morning wanderings seemed to him, as he walked leisurely through the sunlit streets, in a sense ridiculous. After all it was a little thing that he was

going to do; he was going to make, against his will, an afternoon call. To other men it would have seemed less than nothing. Albeit he knew he was about to draw into his life a new experience.

He rang the bell at Number 18, Large Street, and gave his card to the trim little maidservant who opened the door. In a minute or two she returned, and invited him to follow her upstairs; her mistress was in, and would see him at once. She led the way up the broad staircase into a room which could perhaps be most aptly described as a feminine den. The walls, above the low bookshelves which bordered the whole apart-apartment, were hung with a medley of water-colours and photographs, water-colours which a single glance showed him were good, and of the school then most in vogue. The carpet was soft and thick, divans and easy chairs filled with cushions were plentiful. By the side of one of these, which bore

signs of recent occupation, was a reading stand, and upon it a Shakespeare, and a volume of his own critical essays.

To him, with all his senses quickened by an intense curiosity, there seemed to hang about the atmosphere of the room that subtle odour of femininity which, in the case of a man, would probably have been represented by tobacco smoke. A Sèvres jar of Neapolitan violets stood upon the table near the divan. Henceforth the perfume of violets seemed a thing apart from the perfume of all other flowers to the man who stood there waiting, himself with a few of the light purple blossoms in the buttonhole of his frock coat.

CHAPTER IV

AN AWKWARD SITUATION

SHE came to him so noiselessly, that for a moment or two he was unaware of her entrance. There was neither the rustle of skirts or the sound of any movement to apprise him of it, yet he became suddenly conscious that he was not alone. He turned around at once and saw her standing within a few feet of him. She held out her hand frankly.

"So you have come," she said; "I thought that you would. But then you had very little choice, had you?" she added with a little laugh.

She passed him, and deliberately seated



"He turned around at once and saw her standing within a few feet of him."

herself amongst a pile of cushions on the divan nearest her reading stand. For the moment he neglected her gestured invitation, and remained standing, looking at her.

"I was very glad to come," he said simply.

She shook her head.

"You were afraid of my threat. You were afraid that I might come to you. Well, it is probable, almost certain that I should have come. You have saved yourself from that, at any rate."

Although the situation was a novel one to him, he was not in the least embarrassed. He was altogether too sincere to be possessed of any self-consciousness. He found himself at last actually in the presence of the woman who, since first he had seen her, months ago, driving in the Park, had been constantly in his thoughts, and he began to wonder with perfect clearness of judgment

wherein lay her peculiar fascination! That she was handsome, of her type, went for nothing. The world was full of more beautiful women whom he saw day by day without the faintest thrill of interest. Besides, her face was too pale and her form too thin for exceptional beauty. There must be something else,—something about her personality which refused to lend itself to any absolute analysis. She was perfectly dressed,—he realized that, because he was never afterwards able to recall exactly what she wore. Her eyes were soft and dark and luminous, —soft with a light the power of which he was not slow to recognise.

But none of these things were of any important account in reckoning with the woman. He became convinced, in those few moments of deliberate observation, that there was nothing in her "personnel" which could justify her reputation. On the whole he was glad of it. Any other form of attraction was

more welcome to him than a purely physical one!

"First of all," she began, leaning forward and looking at him over her interlaced fingers; "I want you to tell me this! You will answer me faithfully, I know. What did you think of my writing to you, of my persistence? Tell me exactly what you thought."

"I was surprised," he answered; "how could I help it? I was surprised, too," he added, "to find that I wanted very much to come."

"The women whom you know," she said quietly,—"I suppose you do know some,—would not have done such a thing. Some people say that I am mad! One may as well try to live up to one's reputation; I have taken a little of the license of madness."

"It was unusual, perhaps," he admitted; "but who is not weary of usual things? I

gathered from your note that you had something to explain. I was anxious to hear what that explanation could be."

She was silent for a moment, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, a faint smile at the corners of her lips.

"First," she said, "let me tell you this. I want to have you understand why I was anxious that you should not think worse of me than I deserved. I am rather a spoilt woman. I have grown used to having my own way; I wanted to know you, I have wanted to for some time. We have passed one another day after day; I knew quite well all the time who you were, and it seemed so stupid! Do you know once or twice I have had an insane desire to come right up to your chair and break in upon your meditations,—hold out my hand and make you talk to me. That would have been worse than this, would it not? But I firmly believe that I should have done it some

day. So you see I wrote my little note in self-defence."

"I do not know that I should have been so completely surprised after all," he said. "I, too, have felt something of what you have expressed. I have been interested in your comings and your goings. But then you knew that, or you would never have written to me."

"One sacrifices so much," she murmured, "on the altars of the modern Goddess. We live in such a tiny compass,—nothing ever happens. It is only psychologically that one's emotions can be reached at all. Events are quite out of date. I am speaking from a woman's point of view."

"You should have lived," he said, smiling, "in the days of Joan of Arc."

"No doubt," she answered, "I should have found that equally dull. What I was endeavouring to do was, first of all to plead some justification for wanting to know you.

For a woman there is nothing left but the study of personalities."

"Mine," he answered with a faint gleam in his eyes, "is very much at your service."

"I am going to take you at your word," she warned him.

"You will be very much disappointed. I am perfectly willing to be dissected, but the result will be inadequate."

She leaned back amongst the cushions and looked at him thoughtfully.

"Listen," she said; "I can tell you something of your history, as you will see. I want you to fill in the blanks."

"Mine," he murmured, "will be the greater task. My life is a record of blank places. The history is to come."

"This," she said, "is the extent of my knowledge. You were the second son of Sir Lionel Matravers, and you have been an orphan since you were very young. You

were meant to take Holy Orders, but when the time came you declined. At Oxford you did very well indeed. You established a brilliant reputation as a classical scholar, and you became a fellow of St. John's.

"It was whilst you were there that you wrote *Studies in Character*. Two years ago, I do not know why, you gave up your fellowship and came to London. You took up the editorship of a Review—the *Bi-Weekly*, I think—but you resigned it on a matter of principle. You have a somewhat curious reputation. The *Scrutineer* invariably alludes to you as the Apostle of Æstheticism. You are reported to have fixed views as to the conduct of life, down even to its most trifling details. That sounds unpleasant, but it probably isn't altogether true. . . . Don't interrupt, please! You have no intimate friends, but you go sometimes into society. You are apparently a mixture of poet, philosopher, and man of fashion. I

have heard you spoken of more than once as a disciple of Epicurus. You also, in the course of your literary work, review novels—unfortunately for me—and six months ago you were the cause of my nearly crying my eyes out. It was perhaps silly of me to attempt, without any literary experience, to write a modern story, but my own life supplied the motive, and at least I was faithful to what I felt and knew. No one else has ever said such cruel things about my work.

"Woman-like, you see, I repay my injuries by becoming interested in you. If you had praised my book, I daresay I should never have thought of you at all. Then there is one thing more. Every day you sit in the Park close to where I stop, and—you look at me. It seems as though we had often spoken there. Shall I tell you what I have been vain enough to think sometimes?

"I have watched you from a distance, often

before you have seen me. You always sit in the same attitude, your eyebrows are a little contracted, there is generally the ghost of a smile upon your lips. You are like an outsider who has come to look upon a brilliant show. I could fancy that you have clothed yourself in the personality of that young Roman noble whose name you have made so famous, and from another age were gazing tolerantly and even kindly upon the folly and the pageantry which have survived for two thousand years. And then I have taken my little place in the procession, and I have fancied that a subtle change has stolen into your face. You have looked at me as gravely as ever, but no longer as an impersonal spectator.

"It is as though I have seemed a live person to you, and the others, mummies. Once the change came so swiftly that I smiled at you,—I could not help it,—and you looked away."

"I remember it distinctly," he interrupted. "I thought the smile was for some one behind me."

She shook her head.

"It was for you. Now I have finished. Fill in the blanks, please."

He was content to answer her in the same strain. The effect of her complete naturalness was already upon him.

"So far as my personal history is concerned," he told her, "you are wonderfully correct. There is nothing more to be said about it. I gave up my fellowship at Oxford because I have always been convinced of the increasing narrowness and limitations of purely Academic culture and Scholarship. I was afraid of what I should become as an old man, of what I was already growing into. I wanted to have a closer grip upon human things, to be in more sympathetic relations with the great world of my fellow-men. Can you understand me, I wonder?

The influences of a University town are too purely scholarly to produce literary work of wide human interest. London had always fascinated me—though as yet I have met with many disappointments. As to the *Bi-Weekly*, it was my first idea to undertake no fixed literary work, and it was only after great pressure that I took it for a time. As you know, my editorship was a failure."

He paused for a moment or two, and looked steadily at her. He was anxious to watch the effect of what he was going to say.

"You have mentioned my Review upon your novel in the *Bi-Weekly*. I cannot say that I am sorry I wrote it. I never attacked a book with so much pleasure. But I am very sorry indeed that you should have written it. With your gifts you could have given to the world something better than a mere psychological debauch!"

She laughed softly, but genuinely.

"I adore sincerity," she exclaimed, "and it is so many years since I was actually scolded. A 'psychological debauch' is delightful. But I cannot help my views, can I? My experiences were made for me! I became the creature of circumstances. No one is morally responsible for their opinions."

"There are things," he said, "which find their way into our thoughts and consciousness, but of which it would be considered flagrantly bad taste to speak. And there are things in the world which exist, which have existed from time immemorial, the evil legacy of countless generations, of which it seems to me to be equally bad taste to write. Art has a limitless choice of subjects. I would not have you sully your fine gifts by writing of anything save of the beautiful."

"This is rank hedonism," she laughed. "It is a survival of your Academic days."

"Some day," he answered, "we will talk more fully of this. It is a little early for us to discuss a subject upon which we hold such opposite views."

"You are afraid that we might quarrel!"

He shook his head.

"No, not that! Only as I am something of an idealist, and you, I suppose, have placed yourself amongst the ranks of the realists, we should scarcely meet upon a common basis. But will you forgive me if I say so—I am very sure that some day you will be a deserter?"

"And why?"

"I do not know anything of your history," he continued gently, "nor am I asking for your confidence. Only in your story there was a personal note, which

seemed to me to somehow explain the bitterness and directness with which you wrote—of certain subjects. I think that you yourself have had trouble—or perhaps a dear friend has suffered, and her grief has become yours. There was a little poison in your pen, I think. Never mind! We shall be friends, and I shall watch it pass away!"

"Friends," she repeated with a certain wistfulness in her tone. "But have you forgotten—what you came for?"

"I do not think," he said slowly, "that it is of much consequence."

"But it is," she insisted. "You asked me distinctly where I wished to be driven to from the theatre, and I told you—home! All the time I knew that I was going to have supper with Mr. Thorndyke at the Milan! Morally I lied to you!"

"Why?" he asked.

"I cannot tell you," she answered; "it



"'Friends,' she repeated, with a certain wistfulness in her tone."

was an impulse. I thought nothing of accepting the man's invitation. You know him, I daresay. He is a millionaire, and it is his money which supports the theatre. He has asked me several times, and although personally I dislike him, he has, of course, a certain claim upon my acquaintance. I have made excuses once or twice. Last night was the first time I have ever been out anywhere with him. I do not of course pretend to be in the least conventional — I have always permitted myself the utmost liberty of action. Yet—I had wanted so much to know you —I was afraid of prejudicing you. . . . After all, you see, I have no explanation. It was just an impulse. I have hated myself for it; but it is done!"

"It was," he said, "a trifle of no importance. We will forget it."

A gleam of gratitude shone in her dark eyes. Her head drooped a little.

He fancied that her voice was not quite so steady.

"It is good," she said, "to hear you say that."

He looked around the room, and back into her face. Some dim foreknowledge of what was to come between them seemed to flash before his eyes. It was like a sudden glimpse into that unseen world so close at hand, in which he—that Roman noble—had at any rate implicitly believed. There was a faint smile upon his face as his eyes met hers.

"At least," he said, "I shall be able to come and talk with you now at the railing, instead of watching you from my chair. For you were quite right in what you said just now. I have watched for you every day—for many days."

"You will be able to come," she said gravely, "if you care to. You mix so little with the men who love to talk

scandal of a woman, that you may never have heard them—talk of me. But they do, I know! I hear all about it—it used to amuse me! You have the reputation of ultra exclusiveness! If you and I are known to be friends, you may have to risk losing it."

His brows were slightly contracted, and he had half closed his eyes—a habit of his when anything was said which offended his taste.

"I wonder whether you would mind not talking like that," he said.

"Why not? I would not have you hear these things from other people. It is best to be truthful, is it not? To run no risk of any misunderstandings."

"There is no fear of anything of that sort," he said calmly. "I do not pretend to be a magician or a diviner, yet I think I know you for what you are, and it is sufficient. Some day——"

He broke off in the middle of a sentence. The door had opened. A man stood upon the threshold. The servant announced him—Mr. Thorndyke.

Matravers rose at once to his feet. He had a habit — the outcome, doubtless, of his epicurean tenets, of leaving at once, and at any costs, society not wholly agreeable to him. He bowed coldly to the man who was already greeting Berenice, and who was carrying a great bunch of Parma violets.

Mr. Thorndyke was evidently astonished at his presence—and not agreeably.

"Have you come, Mr. Matravers," he asked coldly, "to make your peace?"

"I am not aware," Matravers answered calmly, "of any reason why I should do so."

Mr. Thorndyke raised his eye brows, and drew an afternoon paper from his pocket.

"This is your writing, is it not?" he asked.

Matravers glanced at the paragraph.

"Certainly!"

Mr. Thorndyke threw the paper upon the table.

"Well," he said, "I have no doubt it is an excellent piece of literary work — a satire I suppose you would call it—and I must congratulate you upon its complete success. I don't mind running the theatre at a financial loss, but I have a distinct objection to being made a laughing stock of. I suppose this paper appeared about two hours ago, and already I can't move a yard without having to suffer the condolences of some sympathising ass. I shall close the theatre next week."

"That is naturally," Matravers said, "a matter of complete indifference to me. In the cause of art I should say that you will do well, unless you can select a

play from a very different source. What I wrote of the performance last night, I wrote according to my convictions. You," he added, turning to Berenice, "will at least believe that, I am sure!"

"Most certainly I do," she assured him, holding out her hand. "Must you really go? You will come and see me again—very soon?"

He bowed over her fingers, and then their eyes met for a moment. She was very pale, but she looked at him bravely. He realized suddenly that Mr. Thorndyke's threat was a serious blow to her.

"I am very sorry," he said. "You will not bear me any ill will?"

"None!" she answered; "you may be sure of that!"

She walked with him to the open door, outside which the servant was waiting to show him downstairs.

"You will come and see me again—very soon?" she repeated.

"Yes," he answered simply, "if I may I shall come again! I will come as soon as you care to have me!"

CHAPTER V

THE CONSEQUENCES

MATRAVERS passed out into the street with a curious admixture of sensations in a mind usually so free from any confusion of sentiments or ideas. The few words which he had been compelled to exchange with Thorndyke had grated very much against his sense of what was seemly; he was on the whole both repelled and fascinated by the incidents of this visit of his. Yet as he walked leisurely homewards through the bright crowded streets, he recognised the existence of that strange personal charm in Berenice of which so many people had written and spoken. He

himself had become subject to it in some slight degree, not enough, indeed, to engross his mind, yet enough to prevent any feeling of disappointment at the result of his visit.

She was not an ordinary woman—she was not an ordinarily clever woman. She did not belong to any type with which he was acquainted. She must for ever occupy a place of her own in his thoughts and in his estimation. It was a place very well defined, he told himself, and by no means within that inner circle of his brain and heart wherein lay the few things in life sweet and precious to him. The vague excitement of the early morning seemed to him now, as he moved calmly along the crowded, fashionable thoroughfare, a thing altogether unreal and unnatural. He had been in an emotional frame of mind, he told himself with a quiet smile, when the sight of those few lines in a handwriting then

unknown had so curiously stirred him. Now that he had seen and spoken to her, her personality would recede to its proper proportions, the old philosophic calm which hung around him in his studious life like a mantle would have no further disturbance.

And then he suffered a rude shock! As he passed the corner of a street, the perfume of Neapolitan violets came floating out from a florist's shop upon the warm sunlit air. Every fibre of his being quivered with a sudden emotion! The interior of that little room was before him, and a woman's eyes looked into his. He clenched his hands and walked swiftly on, with pale face and rigid lips, like a man oppressed by some acute physical pain.

There must be nothing of this for him! It was part of a world which was not his world—of which he must never even be a temporary denizen. The thing passed away! With studious care he fixed his mind upon

trifles. There was a crease in his silk hat, clearly visible as he glanced at his reflection in a plate-glass window. He turned into Scott's, and waited whilst it was ironed. Then he walked homewards and spent the remainder of the day carefully revising a bundle of proofs which he found on his table fresh from the printer.

* * * * *

On the following morning he lunched at his club. Somehow, although he was in no sense of the word an unpopular man, it was a rare thing for any one to seek his company uninvited. The scholarly exclusiveness of his Oxford days had not been altogether brushed off in this contact with a larger and more spontaneous social life, and he figured in a world which would gladly have known more of him, as a man of courteous but severe reserve.

To-day he occupied his usual round table set in an alcove before a tall window. For

a recluse, he always found a singular pleasure in watching the faces of the people in that broad living stream, little units in the wheeling cycle of humanity of which he too felt himself to be a part; but to-day his eyes were idle, and his sympathies obstructed. Although a pronounced epicure in both food and drink, he passed a new and delicate *entrée*, and not only ordered the wrong claret, but drank it without a grimace. The world of his sensations had been rudely disturbed. For the moment his sense of proportions was at fault, and before luncheon was over it received a further shock. A handsomely appointed drag rattled past the club on its way into Piccadilly. The woman who occupied the front seat turned to look at the window as they passed, with some evident curiosity—and their eyes met. Matravers set down the glass, which he had been in the act of raising to his lips, untasted.



'Matravers set down the glass, which he had been in the act of raising to his lips, untasted.''

"Berenice and her Father Confessor!" he heard some one remark lightly from the next table. "Pity some one can't teach Thorndyke how to drive! He's a disgrace to the Four-in-hand!"

It was Berenice! The sight of her in such intimate association with a man utterly distasteful to him was one before which he winced and suffered. He was aware of a new and altogether undesired experience. To rid himself of it with all possible speed, he finished his lunch abruptly, and lighting a cigarette, started back to his rooms.

On the way he came face to face with Ellison, and the two men stood together upon the pavement for a moment or two.

"I am not quite sure," Ellison remarked with a little grimace, "whether I want to speak to you or not! What on earth has kindled the destructive spirit in you to such

an extent? Every one is talking of your attack upon the New Theatre!"

"I was sent," Matravers answered, "with a free hand to write an honest criticism—and I did it. Istein's work may have some merit, but it is unclean work. It is not fit for the English stage."

"It is exceedingly unlikely," Ellison remarked, "that the English stage will know him any more! No play could survive such an onslaught as yours. I hear that Thorndyke is going to close the theatre."

"If it was opened," Matravers said, "for the purpose of presenting such work as this latest production, the sooner it is closed the better."

Ellison shrugged his shoulders.

"It is a large subject," he said, "and I am not sure that we are of one mind. We will not discuss it. At any rate, I am very sorry for Berenice!"

"I do not think," Matravers said in measured tones, "that you need be sorry for her. With her gifts she will scarcely remain long without an engagement I trust that she may secure one which will not involve the prostitution of her talent."

Ellison laughed shortly. He had an immense admiration for Matravers, but just at present he was a little out of temper with him.

"You admit her talent, then?" he remarked. "I am glad of that!"

"I am not sure," Matravers said, "that talent is the proper word to use. One might almost call it genius."

Ellison was considerably mollified.

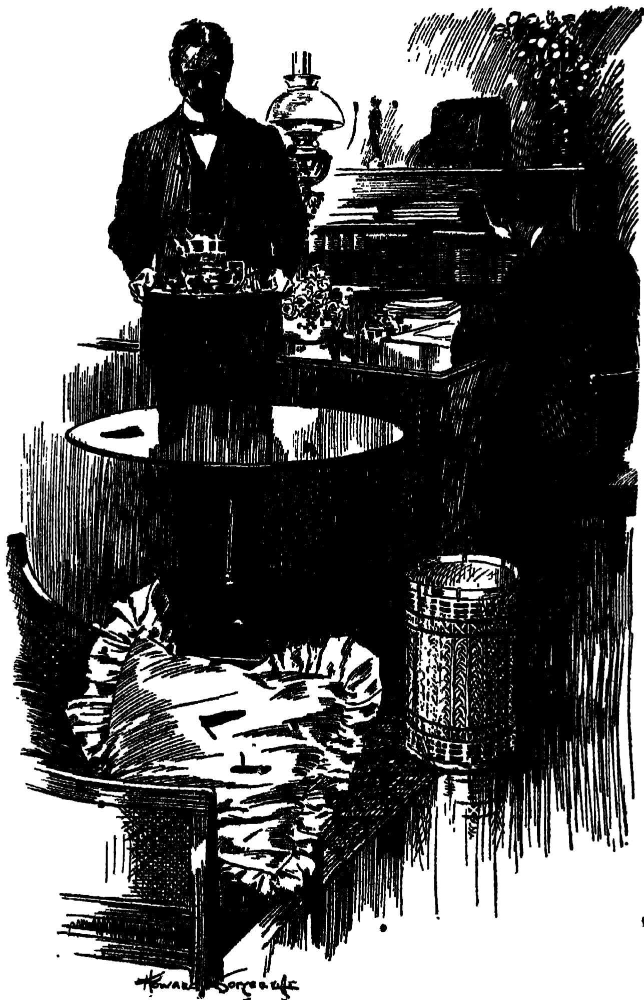
"I am glad to hear you say so," he declared. "At the same time I am afraid her position will be rather an awkward one. She will lose some money by the closing of the theatre, and I don't exactly see what London house is open for her just at pre-

sent. These actor-managers are all so clannish, and they have their own women."

"I am sorry," Matravers said thoughtfully; "at the same time I cannot believe that she will remain very long undiscovered! Good afternoon! I am forgetting that I have some writing to do."

Matravers walked slowly back to his rooms, filled with a new and fascinating idea which Ellison's words had suddenly suggested to him. If it was true that his pen had done her this ill turn, did he not owe her some reparation. It would be a very pleasant way to pay his debt and a very simple one. By the time he had reached his destination the idea had taken definite hold of him.

For several hours he worked at the revision of a certain manuscript, polishing and remodelling with infinite care and pains. Not even content with the correct and taste-



" At half-past four his servant brought in a small tea-equipage."

ful arrangement of his sentences, he read them over to himself aloud, lest by any chance there should have crept into them some trick of alliteration, or juxtaposition of words not entirely musical. In his work he gained, or seemed to gain, a complete absorption. The cloudy disquiet of the last few hours appeared to have passed away,—to have been, indeed, only a fugitive and transitory thing.

At half-past four his servant brought in a small tea-equipage—a silver tray, with an old blue Worcester teapot and cup, and a quaintly cut-glass cream-jug. He made his tea, and drank it with his pen still in his hand. He had scarcely turned back to his work, before the same servant re-entered carrying a frockcoat, an immaculately brushed silk hat, and a fresh bunch of Neapolitan violets. For a moment Matravers hesitated; then he laid down his pen, changed his coat, and once more passed out into the

streets, more brilliant than ever now with the afternoon sunshine. He joined the throng of people leisurely making their way towards the Park!

CHAPTER VI

A DISCUSSION

FOR nearly half an hour he sat in his usual place under the trees, watching with indifferent eyes the constant stream of carriages passing along the drive. It seemed to him only a few hours since he had sat there before, almost in the same spot, a solitary figure in the cold, grey twilight, yet watching then, even as he was watching now, for that small victoria with its single occupant whose soft dark eyes had met his so often with a frank curiosity which she had never troubled to conceal. Something of that same perturbation of spirit which had driven him then out into the dawn-lit streets, was upon him once more, only with a very

real and tangible difference. The grey half-lights, the ghostly shadows, and the faint wind sounding in the tree-tops like the rising and falling of a midnight sea upon some lonely shore, had given to his early morning dreams an indefiniteness which they could scarcely hope to possess now. He himself was a living unit of this gay and brilliant world, whose conversation and light laughter filled the sunlit air around him, whose skirts were brushing against his knees, and whose jargon fell upon his ears with a familiar and a kindly sound. There was no possibility nere for such a wave of passion,—he could call it nothing else,—as had swept through him, when he had first read that brief message from the woman, who had already become something of a disturbing element in nis seemly life. Yet under a calm exterior he was conscious of a distinct tremor of excitement when her carriage drew up within a few feet of him, and obeying her mute



"He rose and offered his hand, and she stepped out on the path."

but smiling command, he rose and offered his hand as she stepped out on to the path.

"This," she remarked, resting her daintily gloved fingers for a moment in his, "is the beginning of a new order of things. Do you realize that only the day before yesterday we passed one another here with a polite stare?"

"I remember it," he answered, "perfectly. Long may the new order last."

"But it is not going to last long—with me at any rate," she said, laughing. "Don't you know that I am almost ruined? Mr. Thorndyke is going to close the theatre. He says that we have been losing money every week. I shall have to sell my horses, and go and live in the suburbs."

"I hope," he said fervently, "that you will not find it so bad as that."

"Of course," she remarked, "you know that yours is the hand which has given us our death-blow. I have just read your notice. It is a brilliant piece of satirical writing, of

course, but need you have been quite so severe? Don't you regret your handiwork a little?"

"I cannot," he answered deliberately. "On the contrary, I feel that I have done you a service. If you do not agree with me to-day, the time will certainly come when you will do so. You have a gift which delighted me: you are really an actress; you are one of very few."

"That is a kind speech," she answered; "but even if there is truth in it, I am as yet quite unrecognised. There is no other theatre open to me; you and I look upon Istein and his work from a different point of view; but even if you are right, the part of Herdrine suited me. I was beginning to get some excellent notices. If we could have kept the thing going for only a few weeks longer, I think that I might have established some sort of a reputation."

He sighed.

"A reputation, perhaps," he admitted; "but not of the best order. You do not wish to be known only as the portrayer of unnatural passions, the interpreter of diseased desires. It would be an ephemeral reputation. It might lead you into many strange byeways, but it would never help you to rise. Art is above all things catholic, and universal. You may be a perfect Herdrine; but Herdrine herself is but a night weed—a thing of no account. Even you cannot make her natural. She is the puppet of a man's fantasy. She is never a woman."

"I suppose," she said sorrowfully, "that your judgment is the true one. Yet—but we will talk of something else. How strange to be walking here with you!"

Berenice was always a much-observed woman, but to-day she seemed to attract more even than ordinary attention. Her personality, her toilette, which was superb, and her companion, were all alike interesting to

the slowly moving throng of men and women amongst whom they were threading their way. The attitude of her sex towards Berenice was in a certain sense a paradox. She was distinctly the most talented and the most original of all the "petticoat apostles," as the very man who was now walking by her side had scornfully described the little band of women-writers who were accused of trying to launch upon society a new type of their own sex. Her last novel was flooding all the bookstalls; and if not of the day, was certainly the book of the hour. She herself, known before only as a brilliant journalist writing under a curious *nom de plume*, had suddenly become one of the most marked figures in London life. Yet she had not gone so far as other writers who had dealt with the same subject. Marriage, she had dared to write, had become the whitewashing of the impure, the sanctifying of the vicious! But she had not added the almost natural

corollary,—therefore let there be no marriage. On the contrary, marriage in the ideal she had written of as the most wonderful and the most beautiful thing in life, — only marriage in the ideal did not exist.

She had never posed as a woman with a mission! She formulated nowhere any scheme for the re-organization of those social conditions whose bases she had very eloquently and very trenchantly held to be rotten and impure. She had written as a prophet of woe! She had preached only destruction, and from the first she had left her readers curious as to what sexual system could possibly replace the old. The thing which happened was inevitable. The amazing demand for her book was exactly in inverse proportion to its popularity amongst her sex. The crusade against men was well! Admittedly they were a bad lot, and needed to be told of it. A little self-assertion on behalf of his superior was a thing to be

encouraged and applauded. But a crusade against marriage! Berenice must be a most abandoned, as well as a most immoral, woman! No one who even hinted at the doctrine of love without marriage could be altogether respectable. Not that Berenice had ever done that. Still, she had written of marriage,—the usual run of marriages,—from a woman's point of view, as a very hateful thing. What did she require, then, of her sex? To live and die old maids, whilst men became regenerated. It was too absurd. There were a good many curious things said, and it was certainly true, that since she had gone upon the stage her toilette and equipage were unrivalled. Berenice looked into the eyes of the women whom she met day by day, and she read their verdict. But if she suffered, she said nothing.

They passed out from the glancing shadows of the trees towards the Piccadilly entrance.

Here they paused for a moment and stood together looking down the drive. The sunlight seemed to touch with quivering fire the brilliant phantasmagoria. Berenice was serious. Her dark eyes swept down the broad path and her under-lip quivered.

"It is this," she exclaimed, with a slight forward movement of her parasol, "which makes me long for an earthquake. Can one do anything for women like that? They are not the creations of a God; they are the parasitical images of type. Only it is a very small type and a very large reproduction. Why do I say these things to you, I wonder? You are against me, too! But then you are not a woman!"

"I am not against you in your detestation of type," he answered. "The whole world of our sex as well as yours is full of worn-out and effete reproductions of an unworthy model. It is this intolerable sameness which suffocates all thought. One meets it every-

where; the deep melancholy of our days is its fruit. But the children of this generation will never feel it. The taste of life between their teeth will be neither like ashes or green figs. They are numbed."

She flashed a look almost of anger upon him.

"Yet you have ranged yourself upon their side. When my story first appeared, its fate hung for days in the balance. Women had not made up their minds how to take it. It came into your hands for review. Well! you did not spare it, did you? It was you who turned the scale. Your denunciation became the keynote of popular opinion concerning me. The women for whose sake I had written it, that they might at least strike one blow for freedom, took it with a virtuous shudder from the hands of their daughters. I was pronounced unwholesome and depraved; even my personal character was torn into shreds. How odd it all seems!" she added,

with a light, mirthless laugh. "It was you who put into their hands the weapon with which to scourge me. Their trim, self-satisfied little sentences of condemnation are emasculated versions of your judgment. It is you whom I have to thank for the closing of the theatre and the failure of Herdine,—you who are responsible for the fact that these women look at me with insolence and the men as though I were a courtesan. How strange it must seem to them to see us together—the wolf and the lamb! Well, never mind. Take me somewhere and give me some tea; you owe me that, at any rate."

They turned and left the park. For a few minutes conversation was impossible, but as soon as they had emerged from the crowd he answered her.

"If I have ever helped any one to believe ill of you," he said slowly, "I am only too happy that they should have the opportunity of seeing us together. You are rather severe

on me. I thought then, as I think now, that it is—to put it mildly—impolitic to enter upon a passionate denunciation of such an institution as marriage when any substitute for it must necessarily be another step upon the downward grade. 'The decadence of self-respect amongst young men, any contrast between their lives and the lives of the women who are brought up to be their wives, is too terribly painful a subject for us to discuss here. Forgive me if I think now, as I have always thought, that it is not a fitting subject for a novelist—certainly not for a woman. I may be prejudiced; yet it was my duty to write as I thought. You must not forget that! So far as your story went, I had nothing but praise for it.' There were many chapters which only an artist could have written."

She raised her eyebrows. They had turned into Bond Street now, and were close to their destination.



"'Order me some tea, please, and a chocolate *éclair*,'"

"You men of letters are so odd," she exclaimed. "What is Art but Truth? and if my book be not true, how can it know anything of art? But never mind! We are talking shop, and I am a little tired of taking life seriously. Here we are! Order me some tea, please, and a chocolate *éclair*."

He followed her to a tiny round table, and sat down by her side upon the cushioned seat. As he gave his order and looked around the little room, he smiled gravely to himself. It was the first time in his life,—at any rate since his boyhood,—that he had taken a woman into a public room. Decidedly it was a new era for him

CHAPTER VII

AN AVOWAL

AN incident, which Matravers had found once or twice uppermost in his mind during the last few days, was recalled to him with sudden vividness as he took his seat in an ill-lit, shabbily upholstered box in the second tier of the New Theatre. He seemed almost to hear again the echoes of that despairing cry which had rung out so plaintively across the desert of empty benches from somewhere amongst the shadows of the auditorium. Several times during the performance he had glanced up in the same direction; once he had almost fancied he could see a solitary, bent figure sitting rigid

and motionless in the first row of the amphitheatre. No man was possessed of a smaller share of curiosity in the ordinary sense of the word than Matravers; but the thought that this might be the same man come again to witness a play which had appealed to him before with such peculiar potency, interested him curiously. At the close of the second act he left his seat, and, after several times losing his way, found himself in the little narrow space behind the amphitheatre. Leaning over the partition, and looking downwards, he had a good view of the man who sat there quite alone, his head resting upon his hand, his eyes fixed steadily upon a soiled and crumpled programme, which was spread out carefully before him. Matravers wondered whether there was not in the clumsy figure and awkward pose something vaguely familiar to him.

An attendant of the place standing by his side addressed him respectfully.

"Not much of a house for the last night, sir," he remarked.

Matravers agreed, and moved his head downwards towards the solitary figure.

"There is one man, at least," he said, "who finds the play interesting."

The attendant smiled.

"I am afraid that the gentleman is a little bit 'hoff,' sir. He seems half silly to talk to. He's a queer sort, any way. Comes here every blessed night, and in the same place. Never misses. Once he came sixpence short, and there was a rare fuss. They wouldn't let him in, and he wouldn't go away. I lent it him at last."

"Did he pay you back?" Matravers asked.

"The very next night; never had to ask him, either. There goes the bell, sir. Curtain up in two minutes."

The subject of their conversation had not



"'Comes here every blessed night, and in the same place.'"

once turned his head or moved towards them. Matravers, conscious that he was not likely to do so, returned to his seat just as the curtain rose upon the last act. The play, grim, pessimistic, yet lifted every now and then to a higher level by strange flashes of genius on the part of the woman, dragged wearily along to an end. The echoes of her last speech died away; she looked at him across the footlights, her dark eyes soft with many regrets, which, consciously or not, spoke to him also of reproach. The curtain descended, and her hands fell to her side. It was the end, and it was failure!

Matravers, making his way more hurriedly than usual from the house, hoped to gain another glimpse of the man who had remained the solitary tenant of the round of empty seats. But he was too late. The man and the audience had melted away in a thin little stream. Matravers stood on the kerb stone hesitating. He had not meant to go behind

to-night. He had a feeling that she must be regarding him at that moment as the executioner of her ambitions. Besides, she was going on to a reception; she would only be in a hurry. Nevertheless, he made his way round to the stage door. He would at least have a glimpse of her. But as he turned the corner, she was already stepping into her carriage. He paused, and simultaneously with her disappearance he realized that he was not the only one who had found his way to the narrow street to see the last of Berenice. A man was standing upon the opposite pavement a little way from the carriage, yet at such an angle that a faint, yellow light shone upon what was visible of his pale face. He had watched her come out, and was gazing now fixedly at the window of her brougham. Matravers knew in a moment that this was the man whom he had seen sitting alone in the amphitheatre; and almost without any definite idea as to his purpose,



"With an old-fashioned courtesy . . . he offered her his arm."

he crossed the street towards him. The man, hearing his footstep, looked up with a sudden start; then, without a second's hesitation, he turned and hurried off. Matravers still followed him. The man heard his footsteps, and turned round, then, with a little moan, he started running, his shoulders bent, his head forward. Matravers halted at once. The man plunged into the shadows, and was lost amongst the stream of people pouring forth from the doors of the Strand theatres.

At her door an hour later Berenice saw the outline of a figure now become very familiar to her, and Matravers, who had been leaving a box of roses, whose creamy pink-and-white blossoms, mingled together in a neighbouring flower-shop, had pleased his fancy, heard his name called softly across the pavement. He turned, and saw Berenice stepping from her carriage. With an old-fashioned courtesy, which always sat well upon him, he offered her his arm.

"I thought that you were to be late," he said, looking down at her with a shade of anxiety in his clear, grave face. "Was not this Lady Truton's night?"

She nodded.

"Yes; don't talk to me—just yet. I am upset! Come in and sit with me!"

He hesitated. With a scrupulous delicacy, which sometimes almost irritated her, he had invariably refrained from paying her visits so late as this. But to-night was different! Her fingers were clasping his arm,—and she was in trouble. He suffered himself to be led up the stairs into her little room.

"Some coffee for two," she told her woman. "You can go to bed then! I shall not want you again!"

She threw herself into an empty chair, and loosened the silk ribbons of her opera cloak.

"Do you mind opening the window?" she

asked. "It is stifling in here. I can scarcely breathe!"

He threw it wide open, and wheeled her chair up to it. The glare from the West End lit up the dark sky. The silence of the little room and the empty street below, seemed deepened by that faint far-away roar from the pandemonium of pleasure. A light from the opposite side of the way,—or was it the rising moon behind the dark houses?—gleamed upon her white throat, and in her soft, dim eyes. She lay quite still, looking into vacancy. Her hand hung over the side of the chair nearest to him. Half unconsciously he took it up and stroked it soothingly. The tears gushed from her eyes. At his kindly touch her over-wrought feelings gave way. Her fingers closed spasmodically upon his.

He said nothing. The time had passed when words were necessary between them. They were near enough to one another now to

understand the value of silence. But those few moments seemed to him for ever like a landmark in his life. A new relation was born between them in the passionate intensity of that deep quietness.

He watched her bosom cease to heave, and the dimness pass from her eyes. Then he took up the box which he had been carrying, and emptied the pink-and-white blossoms into her lap. She stooped down and buried her face in them. Their faint, delicate perfume seemed to fill the room.

"You are very good," she said abruptly. "Thank God that there is some one who is good to me!"

The coffee was in the room, and Berenice threw off her cloak and brought it to him. A fit of restlessness seemed to have followed upon her moment of weakness. She began walking with quick, uneven steps up and down the room. Matravers forgot to drink his coffee. He was watching her with a curious



"There seemed to him something almost unearthly about this woman with her soft grey gown and marble face."

sense of emotional excitement. The little chamber was full of half lights and shadows, and there seemed to him something almost unearthly about this woman with her soft grey gown and marble face. He was stirred by her presence in a new way. The rustle of her silken skirts as she swept in and out of the dim light, the delicate whiteness of her arms and throat, the flashing of a single diamond in her dark coiled hair,—these seemed trivial things enough, yet they were yielding him a new and mysterious pleasure. For the first time his sense of her beauty was fully aroused. Every now and then he caught faint glimpses of her face. It was like the face of a new woman to him. There was some tender and wonderful change there, which he could not understand, and yet which seemed to strike some responsive chord in his own emotions. Instinctively he felt that she was passing into a new phase of life. Surely, he, too, was walking hand and hand with her through the

shadows! The touch of her interlaced fingers had burned his flesh.

Presently she came and sat down beside him.

"Forgive me!" she murmured. "It does me so much good to have you here. I am very foolish!"

"Tell me about it!"

She frowned very slightly, and looked away at a star.

"It is nothing! It is beginning to seem less than nothing! I have written a book for women, for the sake of women, because my heart ached for their sufferings, and because I too have felt the fire. I wonder whether it was really an evil book," she added, still looking away from him at that single star in the dark sky. "People say so! The newspapers say so! Yet it was a true book! I wrote it from my soul,—I wrote it with my own blood. I have not been a good woman, but I have been a pure woman! When I

wrote it, I was lonely; I have always been lonely. But I thought, now I shall know what it is like to have friends. Many women will understand that I have suffered in doing this thing for their sakes! For it was my own life which I lay bare, my own life, my own sufferings, my own agony! I thought, they will come to me and they will thank me for it! I shall have sympathy and I shall have friends. . . . And now my book is written, and I am wiser. I know now that woman does not want her freedom! Though they drag her down into hell, the chains of her slavery have grown around her heart and have become precious to her! Tell me, are those pure women who willingly give their souls and their bodies in marriage to men who have sinned and who will sin again? They do it without disguise, without shame, for position, or for freedom, or for money! yet there are other women whom they call courtesans, and from whose touch they snatch

away the hem of their skirts in horror! Oh, it is terrible! There can be no corruption worse than this in hell!"

"Yours has been the common disappointment of all reformers," he said gravely. "Gratitude is the rarest tribute the world ever offers to those who have laboured to cleanse it. When you are a little older you will have learnt your lesson. But it is always very hard to learn. . . Tell me about to-night!"

She raised her head a little. A faint spot of colour stained her cheek.

"There was one woman who praised me who came to see me, and sent me cards to go to her house. To-night I went. Foolishly I had hoped a good deal from it! I did not like Lady Truton herself, but I hoped that I should meet other women there who would be different! It was a new experience to me to be going amongst my own sex. I was like a child going to her first party. I was quite ex-

cited, almost nervous. I had a little dream,—there would be some women there—one would be enough—with whom I might be friends, and it would make life very different to me to have even one woman friend. But they were all horrid. They were vulgar, and one woman, she took me on one side and praised my book. She agreed, she said, with every word in it! She had found out that her husband had a mistress,—some chorus-girl,—and she was repaying him in his own coin. She too had a lover—and for every infidelity of his she was repaying him in this manner. She dared to assume that I—I should approve of her conduct; she asked me to go and see her! My God! it was hideous."

Matravers laid his hand upon hers, and leaned forward in his chair.

"Lady Truton's was the very worst house you could have gone to," he said gently. "You must not be too discouraged all at once. The women of her set, thank

God, are not in the least typical Englishwomen. They are fast and silly,—a few, I am afraid, worse. They make use of the free discussions in theſe days of the relations between our sexes, to excuse grotesque extravagances in dress and habits which society ought never to pardon. Do not let their judgments or their misinterpretations trouble you! You are as far above them, Berenice, as that little star is from us."

"I do not pretend to be anything but a woman," she said, bending her head, "and to stand alone always is very hard."

"It is very hard for a man! It must be very much harder for a woman. But, Berenice, you would not call yourself absolutely friendless!"

She raised her head for a moment. Her dark eyes were wonderfully soft.

"Who is there that cares?" she murmured.

He touched the tips of her fingers. Her

soft, warm hand yielded itself readily, and slid into his.

"Do I count for no one?" he whispered.

There was a silence in the little room. The yellow glare had faded from the sky, and a night wind was blowing softly in. A clock in the distance struck one. Together they sat and gazed out upon the darkness. Looking more than once into her pale face, Matravers realized again that wonderful change. His own emotions were curiously disturbed. He, himself, so remarkable through all his life for a changeless serenity of purpose, and a fixed masterly control over his whole environment, felt himself suddenly like a rudderless ship at the mercy of a great unknown sea. A sense of drifting was upon him. They were both drifting. Surely this little room, with its dim light and shadows and its faint odour of roses, had become a hotbed of tragedy. He had imagined that death itself was something

like this,—a dissolution of all fixed purposes. And with it all, this remnant of life, if it were but a remnant, seemed suddenly to be flowing through his veins with all the rich, surpassing sweetness of some exquisite symphony!

"You count for a great deal," she said softly. "If you had not come to me, I think that I must have died. . . . If I were to lose you . . . I think that I should die."

She threw herself back in her chair with a gesture of complete abandonment. Her arms hung loosely down over its sides. The moonlight, which had been gradually gathering strength, shone softly upon her pale face and on the soft, lustrous pearls at her throat. Her dark, wet eyes seemed touched with smouldering fire. She looked at him. He sprang to his feet and walked restlessly up and down the room. His forehead was hot and dry, and his hands were trembling.



"He sprang to his feet and walked restlessly up and down the room."

"There is not any reason," he said, halting suddenly in front of her, "why we should lose one another. I was coming to-morrow morning to make a proposition to you. If you accept it, we shall be forced to see a great deal of one another."

"Yes?"

"You perhaps did not know that I had any ambitions as a dramatic author. Yet my first serious work after I left Oxford was a play. I have never done anything with it until yesterday."

"You have really written a play," she murmured, "and you never told me."

"At least I am telling you now," he reminded her; "I am telling you before any one, because I want your help."

"You want what?"

"I want you to help me by taking the part of my heroine. I read it yesterday by appointment to Fergusson. He accepted it at once on the most liberal terms. I told him

there was one condition—that the part of my heroine must be offered to you, if you would accept it. There was a little difficulty, as, of course, Miss Robinson is a fixture at the Pall Mall. However, Fergusson saw you last night from the back of the dress circle, and this morning he has agreed. It only remains for you to read, or allow me to read to you the play."

"Do you mean to say that you are offering me the principal part in a play of yours—at the Pall Mall—with Fergusson?"

"Well, I think that is about what it comes to," he assented.

She rose to her feet and took his hands in hers.

"You are too good—much too good to me," she said softly. "I dare not take it; I am not strong enough."

"It will be you, or no one," he said decidedly. "But first I am going to read

you the play. If I may, I shall bring it to you to-morrow."

"I want to ask you something," she said abruptly. "You must answer me faithfully. You are doing this, you are making me this offer because you think that you owe me something. It is a sort of reparation for your attack upon Herdrine. I want to know if it is that."

"I can assure you," he said earnestly, "that I am not nearly so conscientious. I wrote the play solely as a literary work. I had no thought of having it produced, of offering it to anybody. Then I saw you at the New Theatre; I think that you inspired me with a sort of dramatic excitement. I went home and read my play. Bathilde seemed to me then to speak with your tongue, to look at me with your eyes, to be clothed from her soul outwards with your personality. In the morning I wrote to Fergusson."

"I want to believe you," she said softly; "but it seems so strange. I am no actress like Adelaide Robinson; I am afraid that if I accept your offer, I may hurt the play. She is popular, and I am unknown."

"She has talent," he said, "and experience; you have genius, which is far above either. I am not leaving you any choice at all. To-morrow I shall bring the play."

"You may at least do that," she answered "It will be a pleasure to hear it read. Come to luncheon, and we will have a long afternoon."

Matravers took his leave with a sense of relief. Their farewell had been cordial enough, but unemotional. Yet even he, ignorant of women and their ways as he was, was conscious that they had entered together upon a new phase of their knowledge of each other. The touch of their fingers, the few conventional words which passed between them, as she leaned over

the staircase watching him descend, seemed to him to savour somehow of mockery. He passed out from her presence into the cool, soft night, dazed, not a little bewildered at this new strong sense of living, which had set his pulses beating to music and sent his blood rushing through his body with a new sweetness. Yet with it all he was distressed and unhappy. He was confronted with the one great influence of life against which he had deliberately set his face.

CHAPTER VIII

JEALOUSY

MATRAVERS began to find himself, for the first time in his life, seriously attracted by a woman. He realized it in some measure as he walked homeward in the early morning, after this last interview with Berenice; he knew it for an absolute fact on the following evening as he walked through the crowded streets back to his rooms with the manuscript of the play which he had been reading to her in his pocket. He felt himself moving in what was to some extent an unreal atmosphere. His senses were tingling with the excitement of the last few hours—for the first time he knew the

full fascination of a woman's intellectual sympathy. He had gone to his task wholly devoid of any pleasurable anticipation. It spoke much for the woman's tact that before he had read half a dozen pages he was not only completely at his ease, but was experiencing a new and very pleasurable sensation. The memory of it was with him now—he had no mind to disturb it by any vague alarm as to the future of their relationship.

In Piccadilly he met Fergusson, who turned and walked with him.

"I have been to your rooms, Matravers," the actor said. "I want to know whether you have arranged with your friend?"

"I have just left her," Matravers replied. "She appears to like the play, and has consented to play Bathilde."

The actor smiled. Was Matravers really so simple, or did he imagine that an actress whose name was as yet unknown would hesitate to play with him at the "Pall Mall

Theatre." Yet he himself had been hoping that there might be some difficulty,—he had a "Bathilde" of his own who would take a great deal of pacifying. The thing was settled now however.

"I should like," he said, "to make her acquaintance at once."

"I have thought of that," Matravers said. "Will you lunch with me at my rooms on Sunday and meet her? that is, of course, if she is able to come."

"I shall be delighted," Fergusson answered. "About two, I suppose?"

Matravers assented, and the two men parted. The actor, with a little shrug of his shoulders and the air of a man who has an unpleasant task before him, turned southwards to interview the lady who certainly had the first claim to play "Bathilde." He found her at home and anxiously expecting him.

"If you had not come to-day," she re-



"The lady was getting angry."

marked, "I should have sent for you. I want you to contradict that rubbish."

She threw the theatrical paper across at him, and watched him, whilst he read the paragraph to which she had pointed. He laid the paper down.

"I cannot altogether contradict it," he said. "There is some truth in what the man writes."

The lady was getting angry. She came over to Fergusson and stood by his side.

"You mean to tell me," she exclaimed, "that you have accepted a play for immediate production which I have not even seen, and in which the principal part is to be given to one of those crackpots down at the New Theatre, an amateur, an outsider—a woman no one never heard of before."

"You can't exactly say that," he interposed calmly. "I see you have her novel on your table there, and she is a woman who has been talked about a good deal

lately. But the facts of the case are these. Matravers brought me a play a few days ago which almost took my breath away. It is by far the best thing of the sort I ever read. It is bound to be a great success. I can't tell you any more now,—you shall read it yourself in a day or two. He was very easy to deal with as to terms, but he made one condition: that a certain part in it,—the principal one, I admit,—should be offered to this woman. I tried all I could to talk him out of it, but absolutely without effect. I was forced to consent. There is not a manager in London who would not jump at the play on any conditions. You know our position. 'Her Majesty' is a failure, and I haven't a single decent thing to put on. I simply dared not let such a chance as this go by."

"I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life," the lady exclaimed. "No, I'm not blaming you, Reggie! I don't suppose you

could have done anything else. But this woman, what a nerve she must have to imagine that she can do it! I see her horrid Norwegian play has come to utter grief at the 'New Theatre.'"

"She is a clever woman," Fergusson remarked. "One can only hope for the best."

She flashed a quiet glance at him.

"You know her, then,—you have been to see her."

"Not yet," Fergusson answered. "I am going to meet her to-morrow. Matravers has asked me to lunch."

"Tell me about Matravers," she said.

"I am afraid I do not know much. He is a very distinguished literary man, but his work has generally been critical or philosophical,—every one will be surprised to hear that he has written a play. You will find that there will be quite a stir about it. The reason why we have no plays now-a-days which can possibly be classed as literature,

is because the wrong class of man is writing for the stage. Smith and Francis and all these men have fine dramatic instincts, but they are not scholars. Their dialogue is mostly beneath contempt; there is a dash of conventionality in their best work. Now, Matravers is a writer of an altogether different type."

"Thanks," she interrupted, "but I don't want a homily. I am only curious about the man himself."

Fergusson pulled himself up a little annoyed. He had begun to talk about a subject of peculiar interest to him.

"Oh, the man himself is rather an interesting personality," he declared. "He is a recluse, a dilettante, and a very brilliant man of letters."

"I want to know," the lady said impatiently, "whether he is married."

"Married! certainly not," Fergusson assured her.

"Very well, then, I am going there to luncheon with you to-morrow."

Fergusson looked blank.

"But, my dear girl," he protested, "how on earth——"

"Don't be foolish, Reggie," she said calmly. "It is perfectly natural for me to go! I have been your principal actress for several seasons. I suppose if there is a second woman's part in the piece, it will be mine, if I choose to take it. You must write and ask Matravers for permission to bring me. You can mention my desire to meet the new actress if you like."

Fergusson took up his hat.

"Matravers is not the sort of man one feels like taking a liberty with," he said. "But I'll try him."

"You can let me know to-night at the Theatre," she directed.

CHAPTER IX

A WHITE STONE

NOTHING short of a miracle could have made Matravers' luncheon party a complete success; yet, so far as Berenice was concerned, it could scarcely be looked upon in any other light. Her demeanour towards Adelaide Robinson and Fergusson was such as to give absolutely no opportunity for anything disagreeable! She frankly admitted both her inexperience and her ignorance. Yet, before they left, both Fergusson and his companion began to understand Matravers' confidence in her. There was something almost magnetically attractive about her personality.

The luncheon was very much what one

who knew him would have expected from Matravers—simple, yet served with exceeding elegance. The fruit, the flowers, and the wine had been his own care; and the table had very much the appearance of having been bodily transported from the palace of a noble of some southern land. After the meal was over, they sat out upon the shaded balcony and sipped their coffee and liqueurs,—Fergusson and Berenice wrapt in the discussion of many details of the work which lay before them, whilst Matravers, with an effort which he carefully concealed, talked continually with Adelaide Robinson.

"Is it true," she asked him, "that you did not intend your play for the stage—that you wrote it from a literary point of view only?"

"In a sense, that is quite true," he admitted. "I wrote it without any definite idea of offering it to any London manager. My doing so was really only an impulse."

"If Mr. Fergusson is right—and he is a

pretty good judge—you won't regret having done so," she remarked. "He thinks it is going to have a big run."

"He may be right," Matravers answered. "For all our sakes, I hope so!"

"It will be a magnificent opportunity for your friend."

Matravers looked over towards Berenice. She was talking eagerly to Fergusson, whose dark, handsome head was very close to hers, and in whose eyes was already evident his growing admiration. Matravers was suddenly conscious of an odd sense of disturbance. He was grateful to Adelaide Robinson for her intervention. She had risen to her feet, and glanced downwards at the little brougham drawn up below.

"I am so sorry to go," she said; "but I positively must make some calls this afternoon."

Fergusson rose also, with obvious regret, and they left together.



" Matravers was suddenly conscious of an odd sense of disturbance."

"Don't forget," he called back from the door; "we read our parts to-morrow, and rehearsals begin on Thursday."

"I have it all down," Berenice answered. "I will do my best to be ready for Thursday."

Berenice remained standing, looking thoughtfully after the little brougham, which was being driven down Piccadilly.

Matravers came back to her, and laid his hand gently upon her arm.

"You must not think of going yet," he said. "I want you to stay and have tea with me."

"I should like to," she answered. "I seem to have so much to say to you."

He piled her chair with cushions and drew it back into the shade. Then he lit a cigarette, and sat down by her side.

"I suppose you must think that I am very ungrateful," she said. "I have scarcely said 'thank you' yet, have I?"

"You will please me best by never saying

it," he answered. "I only hope that it will be a step you will never regret."

"How could I?"

He looked at her steadily, a certain grave concentration of thought manifest in his dark eyes. Berenice was looking her best that afternoon. She was certainly a very beautiful and a very distinguished-looking woman. Her eyes met his frankly; her lips were curved in a faintly tender smile.

"Well, I hardly know," he said. "You are going to be a popular actress. Henceforth the stage will have claims upon you! It will become your career."

"You have plenty of confidence."

"I have absolute confidence in you," he declared, "and Fergusson is equally confident about the play; chance has given you this opportunity—the result is beyond question! Yet I confess that I have a presentiment. If the manuscript of 'The Heart of the People' were in my hands at this moment, I think that

I would tear it into little pieces, and watch them flutter down on to the pavement there."

"I do not understand you," she said softly. "You say that you have no doubt——"

"It is because I have no doubt—it is because I know that it will make you a popular and a famous actress. You will gain this. I wonder what you will lose."

She moved restlessly on her chair.

"Why should I lose anything?"

"It is only a presentiment," he reminded her. "I pray that you may not lose anything. Yet you are coming under a very fascinating influence. It is your personality I am afraid of. You are going to belong definitely to a profession which is at once the most catholic and the most narrowing in the world. I believe that you are strong enough to stand alone, to remain yourself. I pray that it may be so, and yet, there is just the shadow of the presentiment. Perhaps it is foolish."

Their chairs were close together; he suddenly felt the perfume of her hair and the touch of her fingers upon his hand. Her face was quite close to his.

"At least," she murmured, "I pray that I may never lose your friendship."

"If only I could ensure you as confidently the fulfilment of all your desires," he answered, "you would be a very happy woman. I am too lonely a man, Berenice, to part with any of my few joys. Whether you change or no, you must never change towards me."

She was silent. There were no signs left of the brilliant levity which had made their little luncheon party pass off so successfully. She sat with her head resting upon her elbow, gazing steadily up at the little white clouds which floated over the housetops. A tea equipage was brought out and deftly arranged between them.

"To-day," Matravers said, "I am going to



"'I can do it,' she assured him. 'I believe you doubt my ability, but you need not.'"

have the luxury of having my tea made for me. Please come back from dreamland and realize the Englishman's idyll of domesticity."

She turned in her chair, and smiled upon him.

"I can do it," she assured him. "I believe you doubt my ability, but you need not."

They talked lightly for some time—an art which Matravers found himself to be acquiring with wonderful facility. Then there was a pause. When she spoke again, it was in an altogether different tone.

"I want you to answer me," she said, "it is not too late. Shall I give up Bathilde—and the stage? Listen! You do not know anything of my circumstances. I am not dependent upon either the stage or my writing for a living. I ask you for your honest advice. Shall I give it up?"

"You are placing a very heavy responsibility upon my shoulders," he answered her

thoughtfully. "Yet I will try to answer you honestly. I should be happier if I could advise you to give it up! But I cannot! You have the gift—you must use it. The obligation of self-development is heaviest upon the shoulders of those whose foreheads Nature's twin-sister has touched with fire! I would it were any other gift, Berenice; but that is only a personal feeling. No! you must follow out your destiny. You have an opportunity of occupying a unique and marvellous position. You can create a new ideal. Only be true always to yourself. Be very jealous indeed of absorbing any of the modes of thought and life which will spring up everywhere around you in the new world. Remember it is the old ideals which are the sweetest and the truest. . . . Forgive me, please! I am talking like a pedagogue."

"You are talking as I like to be talked to," she answered. "Yet you need not fear that my head will be turned, even if the

success should come. You forget that I am almost an old woman. The religion of my life has long been conceived and fashioned."

He looked at her with a curious smile. If thirty seemed old to her, what must she think of him?"

"I wonder," he said simply, "if you would think me impertinent if I were to ask you to tell me more about yourself. How is it that you are altogether alone in the world?"

The words had scarcely left his lips before he would have given much to have recalled them. He saw her start, flinch back as though she had been struck, and a grey pallor spread itself over her face, almost to the lips. She looked at him fixedly for several moments without speaking.

"One day," she said, "I will tell you all that. You shall know everything. But not now; not yet."

"Whenever you will," he answered, ignoring her evident agitation. "Come! what do

you say to a walk down through the Park? To-day is a holiday for me—a day to be marked with a white stone. I have registered an oath that I will not even look at a pen. Will you not help me to keep it?"

"By all means," she answered blithely. "I will take you home with me, and keep you there till the hour of temptation has passed. To-day is to be my last day of idleness! I too have need of a white stone."

"We will place them," he said "side by side"

CHAPTER X

NEARLY CONFESSED

MATRAVERS'S luncheon party marked the termination for some time of any confidential intercourse between Berenice and himself. Every moment of her time was claimed by Fergusson, who, in his anxiety to produce a play from which he hoped so much before the wane of the season, gave no one any rest, and worked himself almost into a fever. There were two full rehearsals a day, and many private ones at her rooms. Matravers calling there now and then found Fergusson always in possession, and by degrees gave it up in despair. He had a horror of interfering in any way, even of

being asked for his advice concerning the practical reproduction of his work. Fergusson's invitations to the rehearsals at the theatre he rejected absolutely. As the time grew shorter, Berenice became pale and almost haggard with the unceasing work which Fergusson's anxiety imposed upon her. One night she sent for Matravers, and hastening to her rooms, he found her for the first time alone.

"I have sent Mr. Fergusson home," she exclaimed, welcoming him with outstretched hands, but making no effort to rise from her easy chair. "Do you know that man is driving me slowly mad? I want you to interfere."

"What can I do?" he said.

"Anything to bring him to reason! He is over rehearsing! Every line, every sentence, every gesture, he makes the subject of the most exhaustive deliberation. He will have nothing spontaneous; it is positively



"'Do you know that man is driving me slowly mad? I want you to interfere.'"

stifling. A few more days of it and my reason will go! He is a great actor, but he does not seem to understand that to reduce everything to mathematical proportions is to court failure."

"I will go and see him," Matravers said. "You wish for no more rehearsals, then?"

"I do not want to see his face again before the night of the performance," she declared vehemently. "I am perfect in my part. I have thought about it—dreamed about it. I have lived more as 'Bathilde' than as myself for the last three weeks. Perhaps," she continued more slowly, "you will not be satisfied. I scarcely dare to hope that you will be. Yet I have reached my limitations. The more I am made to rehearse now, the less natural I shall become."

"I will speak to Fergusson," Matravers promised. "I will go and see him to-night. But so far as you are concerned, I have no

fear, you will be the 'Bathilde' of my heart and my brain. You cannot fail!"

She rose to her feet "It is," she said, "the desire of my life to make your 'Bathilde' a creature of flesh and blood. If I fail, I will never act again."

"If you fail," he said, "the fault will be in my conception, not in your execution. But indeed we will not consider anything so improbable. Let us put the play behind us for a time and talk of something else! You must be weary of it."

She shook her head. "Not that! never that! Just now it is my life, only it is the details which weary me, the eternal harping upon the mechanical side of it. Will you read to me for a little? and I will make you some coffee. You are not in a hurry, are you?"

"I have come," he said, "to stay with you until you send me away! I will read to you with pleasure. What will you have?"

She handed him a little volume of poems; he glanced at the title and made a faint grimace. They were his own.

Nevertheless, he read for an hour, till the streets below grew silent, and his own voice, unaccustomed to such exercise, lost something of its usual clearness. Then he laid the volume down, and there was silence between them.

"I have been thinking," he said at last, "of a singular incident in connection with your performance at the 'New Theatre'; something brought it into my mind just then. I meant to have mentioned it before."

She looked up with only a slight show of interest. Those days at the theatre seemed to her now to be very far behind. There was nothing in connection with them which she cared to remember.

"It was the night of my first visit there," he continued. "There is a terrible scene at the end of the second act between Herdrine

and her husband—you recollect it, of course. Just as you finished your denunciation, I distinctly heard a curious cry from the back of the house. It was a greater tribute to your acting than the applause, for it was genuine."

"The piece was gloomy enough," she remarked, "to have dissolved the house in tears."

"At least," he said, "it wrung the heart of one man. For I have not told you all. I was interested enough to climb up into the amphitheatre. The man sat there alone amongst a wilderness of empty seats. He was the picture of abject misery. I could scarcely see his face, but his attitude was convincing. It was not a thing of chance either. I made some remark about him to an attendant, and he told me that night after night that man had occupied the same seat, always following every line of the play with the same mournful concentration, never

speaking to any one, never moving from his seat from the beginning of the play to the end."

"He must have been," she declared, "a person of singularly morbid taste. When I think of it now I shiver. I would not play Herdrine again for worlds."

"I am very glad to hear you say so," he said, smiling. "Do you know that to me the most interesting feature of the play was its obvious effect upon this man. Its extreme pessimism is too much paraded, is laid on altogether with too thick a hand to ring true. The thing is an involved nightmare. One feels that as a work of art it is never convincing, yet underneath it all there must be something human, for it found its way into the heart of one man."

"It is possible," she remarked, "that he was mad. The man who found it sufficiently amusing to come to the theatre night after

night could scarcely have been in full possession of his senses."

"That is possible," he admitted; "but I do not believe it. The man's face was sad enough, but it was not the face of a madman."

"You did see his face, then?"

"On the last night of the play," he continued. "You remember you were going on to Lady Truton's, so I did not come behind. But I had a fancy to see you for a moment, and I came round into Pitt Street just as you were driving off. On the other side of the way this man was standing watching you!"

She looked at him with a suddenly kindled interest—or was it fear?—in her dark eyes The colour had left her cheeks; she was white to the lips.

"Watching me?"

"Yes. As your carriage drove off he stood watching it. I don't know what prompted

me, but I crossed the street to speak to him. He seemed such a lone, mournful figure standing there half dazed, shabby, muttering softly to himself. But when he saw me coming, he gave one half-frightened look at me and ran, literally ran down the street on to the Strand. I could not follow,—the police would have stopped him. So he disappeared."

"You saw his face. What was he like?"

Berenice had leaned right back amongst the yielding cushions of her divan, and he could scarcely see her face. Yet her voice sounded to him strange and forced. He looked at her in some surprise.

"I had a glimpse of it. It was an ordinary face enough; in fact, it disappointed me a little. But the odd part of it was that it seemed vaguely familiar to me. I have seen it before, often. Yet, try as I will, I cannot recollect where, or under what circumstances."

"At Oxford," she suggested. "By the bye, what was your college?"

"St. John's. No, I do not think,—I hope that it was not at Oxford. Some day I shall think of it quite suddenly."

Berenice rose from her chair with a sudden, tempestuous movement and stood before him.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. "Supposing I were to tell you that I knew or could guess who that man was—why he came! Oh, if I were to tell you that I were a fraud, that——"

Matravers stopped her.

"I beg," he said, "that you will tell me nothing!"

There was a short silence. Berenice seemed on the point of breaking down. She was nervously lacing and interlacing her fingers. Her breath was coming spasmodically.

"Berenice," he said softly, "you are overwrought; you are not quite yourself to-night.

Do not tell me anything. Indeed, there is no need for me to know; just as you are I am content with you, and proud to be your friend."

"Ah!"

She sat down again. He could not see her face, but he fancied that she was weeping. He himself found his customary serenity seriously disturbed. Perhaps for the first time in his life he found himself not wholly the master of his emotions. The atmosphere of the little room, the perfume of the flowers, the soft beauty of the woman herself, whose breath fell almost upon his cheek, affected him as nothing of the sort had ever done before. He rose abruptly to his feet.

"You will be so much better alone," he said, taking her fingers and smoothing them softly in his for a moment. "I am going away now."

"Yes. Good-bye!"

At the threshold he paused. She had not looked up at him. She was still sitting there with bowed head and hidden face. He closed the door softly, and went out.



"At the threshold he paused. . . . She was still sitting there with bowed head and hidden face."

CHAPTER XI

AN INVITATION

THE enthusiasm with which Matravers' play had been received on the night of its first appearance was, if anything, exceeded on the night before the temporary closing of the theatre for the usual summer vacation. The success of the play itself had never been for a moment doubtful. For once the critics, the general press, and the public, were in entire and happy agreement. The first night had witnessed an extraordinary scene. An audience as brilliant as any which could have been brought together in the first city in the world, had flatly refused to leave the theatre until Matravers himself, reluctant and ill-pleased, had joined

Fergusson and Berenice before the footlights; and now on the eve of its temporary withdrawal something of the same sort was threatened again, and Matravers only escaped by standing up in the front of his box, and bowing his acknowledgments to the delighted audience.

It was a well-deserved success, for certainly as a play it was a brilliant exception to anything which had lately been produced upon the English stage. The worn-out methods and motives of most living playwrights were rigorously avoided; everything about it was fresh and spontaneous. Its sentiment was relieved by the most delicate vein of humour. It was everywhere tender and human. The dialogue, to which Matravers had devoted his usual fastidious care, was polished and sprightly; there was not anywhere a single dull or unmusical line. It was a classic, the critics declared, —the first literary play by a *living* author

which London had witnessed for many years. The bookings for months ahead were altogether phenomenal. Fergusson saw a certain fortune within his hands, and Matravers, sharing also in the golden harvest, found another and a still greater cause for satisfaction.

For Berenice had justified his selection. The same night, as the greatest of critics, speaking through the columns of the principal daily paper, had said, which had presented to them a new writer for the stage, had given them also a new actress. She had surprised Matravers, she had amazed Fergusson, who found himself compelled to look closely to his own laurels. In short, she was a success, descended, if not from the clouds, at least from the mists of Isteinism, but accorded, without demur or hesitation, a foremost place amongst the few accepted actresses. Her future and his position were absolutely secured, and her reputation, as

Matravers was happy to think, was made, not as the portrayer of a sickly and unnatural type of diseased womanhood, but as the woman of his own creation, a very sweet and pure English lady.

The house emptied at last, and Matravers made his way behind, where many of Fergusson's friends had gathered together, and where congratulations were the order of the day. A species of informal reception was going on, champagne cup and sandwiches were being handed around and a general air of extreme good humour pervaded the place. Berenice was the centre of a group of men amongst whom Matravers was annoyed to see Thorndyke. If he could have withdrawn unseen, he would have done so; but already he was surrounded. A little stir at the entrance attracted his attention. He turned round and found Fergusson presenting him to a royal personage, who was graciously pleased, however, to remember a former meet-

ing, and waved away the words of introduction.

It chanced, without any design on his part, that Berenice and he left almost at the same time, and met near the stage door. She dropped Fergusson's arm—he had left his guests to see her to her carriage—and motioned to Matravers.

"Won't you see me home?" she asked quietly "I have sent my maid on, she was so tired, and I am all alone."

"I shall be very pleased," Matravers answered. "May I come in with you?" Fergusson lingered for a moment or two at the carriage door, and then they drove off. Berenice, with a little sigh, leaned back amongst the cushions.

"You are very tired, I am afraid," he said gently. "The last few weeks must have been a terrible strain upon you."

"They have been in many ways," she said, "the happiest of my life."

"I am glad of that; yet it is quite time that you had a rest."

She did not answer him,—she did not speak again until the carriage drew up before her house. He handed her out, and opened the door with the latch-key which she passed over to him.

"Good-night," he said, holding out his hand.

"You must please come in for a little time," she begged. "I have seen you scarcely at all lately. You have not even told me about your travels."

He hesitated for a moment, then seeing the shade upon her face, he stepped forward briskly.

"I should like to come very much," he said, "only you must be sure to send me away if I stay too long. You are tired already."

"I am tired," she admitted, leading the way upstairs, "only it will rest me much



'Found himself wondering at this new and very natural note of domesticity in her.'

more to have you talk to me than to go to bed. Mine is scarcely a physical fatigue. My nerves are all quivering. I could not sleep! Tell me where you have been."

Matravers took the seat to which she motioned him, and obeyed her, watching, whilst she stooped down over the fire and poured water into a brazen coffee-pot, and took another cup and saucer from a quaint little cupboard. She made the coffee carefully and well, and Matravers, as he lit his cigarette, found himself wondering at this new and very natural note of domesticity in her.

All the time he was talking, telling her in a few chosen sentences of the little tour for which she really was responsible—of the pink-and-white apple-blossoms of Brittany, of the peasants in their quaint and picturesque garb, and of the old time-worn churches, the exploration of which had constituted his chief interest. She listened eagerly; every

word of his description, so vivid and picturesque, was interesting. When he had finished, he looked at her thoughtfully.

"You too," he said, "need a change! You have worked very hard, and you will need all your strength for the autumn season."

"I am going away," she said, "very soon. Perhaps to-morrow."

He looked at her surprised.

"So soon!"

"Why not? What is there to keep me? The theatre is closed. London is positively stifling. I am longing for some fresh air."

He was silent for a moment or two. It was so natural that she should go, and yet in a sense it was so unexpected. Looking steadily across at her as she leaned back amongst the cushions of her chair, her dark eyes watching his face, her attitude and expression alike convincing him in some subtle way of her satisfaction at his presence, he became suddenly conscious that

the time which he had dimly anticipated with mingled fear and pleasure was now close at hand. His heart was beating with a quickened throb! He was aghast as he realized with quick, unerring truth the full effect of her words upon him. He drew a sharp little breath and walked to the open window, taking in a long draught of the fresh night air, sweetly scented with the perfume of the flowers in her boxes. Her voice came to him low and sweet from the interior of the room.

"There is a little farmhouse in Devonshire which belongs to me. It is nothing but a tumbledown, grey stone place; but there are hills, and meadows, and country lanes, and the sea. I want to go there."

"Away from me!" he cried hoarsely.

"Will you come too?" she murmured.

He turned back into the room and looked at her. She was standing up, coming towards him; a faint tinge of pink colour had stained

her cheek—her bosom was heaving—her eyes were challenging his with a light which needed no borrowed brilliancy. Go with her! The man's birthright, his passion, which through the long days of his austere life had lain dormant and undreamt of swept up from his heart. He held out his arms, and she came across the room to him with a sweet effort of self-yielding which yet waited for while it invited his embrace.

"You mean it?" he murmured, "you are sure?"

She did not answer him. But indeed there was no need.



"She did not answer him. But indeed there was no need."

CHAPTER XII

CONFESSION

MATRAVERS never altogether forgot the sensations with which he awoke on the following morning. Notwithstanding a sleepless night, he rose and made a deliberate toilet with a wonderful buoyancy of spirits. The change which had come into his life was a thing so wonderful that he could scarcely realize it. Yet it was true! He had found the one experience in life which had hitherto been denied him, and he was amazed at the full extent of its power and sweetness. He felt himself to be many years younger! Old dreams and enthusiasms were suddenly revived. Once more his foot seemed to be poised upon the threshold of life! After

all, he had not yet reached middle age! He was surprised to find himself so young. Marriage, although so far as regarded himself he had never imagined it a possible part of his life, was a condition against which he held no vows. Instinctively he felt that with Berenice, existence must inevitably become a fuller and a richer thing. The old days of philosophic quietude, of self-contained and cultured ease, had been in themselves very pleasant, but his was altogether too large a nature to become in any way the slave of habit. He looked forward to their abandonment without regret,—what was to come would be a continuation of the best part of them set to the sweetest music. He was conscious of holding himself differently as he entered his breakfast-room! Was it his fancy, or was the perfume of his little bowl of roses indeed more sweet this morning, the sunshine mellower and warmer, the flavour of his grapes more delicate. At any rate, he

ate with a rare appetite, and then whilst he smoked a cigarette afterwards, an idea came to him! The colour rose in his cheeks,—he felt like a boy. In a few minutes he was walking through the streets, smiling softly to himself as he thought of his strange errand.

He found his way to a jeweller's shop in Bond Street, and asked for pearls! They were the only jewels she cared for, and he made a deliberate and careful choice, wondering more than once, with a curious sort of shyness, whether the man who served him so gravely had any idea for what purpose he was buying the ring which had been the object of his first inquiry. He walked home with a little square box in his hand, and a much smaller one in his waistcoat pocket. On the pavement he had hesitated for a moment, but a glance at his watch had decided him. It was too early to go and see her yet. He walked back to his rooms! There was a little work which he must finish

during the day. He had better attempt it at once.

On his desk a letter was waiting for him. With a little tremor of pleasure he recognised her handwriting. He took it over to the tall sunny window, with a smile of anticipation upon his lips. He broke the seal and read:

"My love, the daylight has come, and I am here where you left me, a very happy and yet a very unhappy woman! Is it indeed only a few hours since we parted? It all seems so different. The starlight and the night wind and the deep, sweet silence have gone! There is a great shaft of yellow light in the sky, and a bank of purple clouds where the sun has risen. Only the perfume of your roses lying crushed in my lap remains to prove to me that it has not all been a very sweet dream. Dearest, I have a secret to tell you,—the sorrow of my life. The time has come when you must, alas! know it. Last night

it was enough for me to hear you tell me of your love! Nothing else in the world seemed worthy of a moment's thought. But as you were leaving, you whispered something about our marriage. How sweetly it sounded,—and yet how bitterly! For, dear, I can never marry you. I am already married! I can see you start when you read this. You will blame me for having kept this secret from you. Very likely you will be angry with me. Only for the love of God pity me a little!

"My story is so commonplace. I can tell it you in a few sentences. I married when I was seventeen at my father's command, to save him from ruin. My husband, like my father, was a city merchant. I did not love him, but then I did not know what love was. My girlhood was a miserable one. My father belonged to the sect of Calvinists. Our home was hideous, and we were poor. Any release from it was welcome. John Drage, the man

whom I married, had one good quality. He was generous. He bought me pictures, and books—things which I always craved. When my father's command came, it did not seem a hardship. I married him. He was not so much a bad man, perhaps as a weak one. We lived together for four years. I had one child, a little boy. Then I made a horrible discovery. My husband, whom I knew to be a drunkard, was hideously, debasingly false to me. The bald facts are these. I myself, saw him drunk and helped into his carriage by one of those women whose trade it is to prey upon such creatures. This was not an exceptional occurrence. It was a habit.

"There, I have told you. It would have hurt me less to have cut off my right hand. But there shall be no misunderstanding, nor any concealment between us. I left John Drage's house that night. I took little Freddy with me; but when I refused to return, he

stole the child away from me. Then I drew a sharp line at that point in my life. I had neither friend nor relation, but there was some money which had been left me soon after my marriage. I lived alone, and I began to write. That is my story. That is why I cannot marry you.

"Dear, I want you, now that you know my very ugly history, to consider this. Whilst I was married, I was faithful to my husband; since then I have been faithful to my self-respect. But I have told myself always that if ever the time came when I should love, I would give myself to that man without hesitation and without shame. And that time has come, dear. You know that I love you! Your coming has been the great awakening joy of my life. Nothing that has gone before, nothing that the future may hold, can ever trouble me if we are together—you and I. I have suffered more than most women. But you will help me to forget it.

"I sit here with my face to the morning, and I seem to see a new life stretching out before me. Is not love a beautiful thing! I am not ambitious any more. I do not want any other object in life than to make you happy, and to be made happy by you. I began this letter with a heavy heart and with trembling fingers. But now I am quite calm and quite happy. I know that you will come to me. You see, I have great faith in your love. Thank God for it!

"BERENICE."

The letter fluttered from Matravers' fingers on to the floor. For several minutes he stood quite still, with his hand pressed to his heart. Then he calmly seated himself in a little easy chair which stood by his side, with its back to the window. He had a curious sense of being suddenly removed from his own personality,—his own self. He was another man gazing for the last time upon a very familiar scene.



"The letter fluttered from Matravers' fingers on to the floor."

He sat there with his head resting upon the palm of his hand, looking with lingering eyes around his little room, even the simplest objects of which were in a sense typical of the life which he was abandoning. He knew that that life, if even its influence had not been wide, had been a studiously well-ordered and a seemly thing. A touch of that ultra æstheticism, which had given to all his writings a peculiar tone and individuality, had permeated also his ideas as to the simplest events of living. All that was commonplace and ugly and vicious had ever repelled him. He had lived not only a clean life, but a sweet one. His intense love for pure beauty, combined with a strong dash of epicureanism, had given a certain colour to its outward form as well as to its inward workings. Even the simplest objects by which he was surrounded were the best of their kind,—carefully and faithfully chosen. The smallest details of his daily life had

always been governed by a love of comely and kindly order. Both in his conversation and in his writings he had studiously avoided all excess, all shadow of evil or unkindness. His opinions, well chosen and deliberate though they were, were flavoured with a delicate temperateness so distinctive of the man and of his habits. And now, it was all to come to an end! He was about to sever the cords, to cut himself adrift from all that had seemed precious, and dear, and beautiful to him. He, to whom even the women of the streets had been as sacred things, was about to become the established and the open lover of a woman whom he could never marry. To a certain extent it was like moral shipwreck to him. Yet he loved her! He was sure of that. He had called himself in the past, as indeed he had every right to, something of a philosopher; but he had never tried to harden within himself the human leaven which had kept him, in sympathy and kindliness, always

in close touch with his fellows. And this was its fruit! To him of all men there had come this. . .

Soon he found himself in the street, on his way to her. Such a letter as this called for no delay. It was barely twelve o'clock when he rang the bell at her house. The girl who answered it handed him a note. He asked quickly for her mistress.

She left an hour ago by the early train, he was told. She has gone into the country. She had made up her mind quite suddenly, and had not even taken her maid. The address would probably be in the letter.

Still standing on the doorstep, he tore open the note and read it. There were only a few lines.

"Dearest, can you take a short holiday? I have a fancy to have you come to me at my little house in Devonshire. London is stifling me, and I want to taste the full sweetness

of my happiness. You see I do not doubt you! I know that you will come. Shall you mind a tiresome railway journey? The address is Bossington Old Manor House, Devonshire, and the station is Minehead. Wire what train you are coming by, and I will send something to meet you.

"BERENICE."

CHAPTER XIII

JOHN DRAGE

MATRAVERS walked back to his rooms and ordered his portmanteau to be packed. Then he went out, and after making all his arrangements for an absence from town, bought a Bradshaw. There were two trains, he found, by which he could travel, one at three, the other at half-past four. He arranged to catch the earlier one, and drove to his club for lunch. Afterwards he strolled towards the smoking-room, but finding it unusually full, was on the point of withdrawing. As he lingered on the threshold, a woman's name fell upon his ears. The speaker was Mr. Thorndyke. He became rigid.

"Why, yes, I gave her the victoria," he was saying. "We called it a birthday present, or something of that sort. I supposed every one knew about that. Those little arrangements generally are known somehow!"

The innuendo was unmistakable. Matravers advanced with his usual leisurely walk to the little group of men.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly. "I understood Mr. Thorndyke to say, I believe, that he had given a carriage to a certain lady. Am I correct?"

Thorndyke turned upon him sharply. There was a sudden silence in the crowded room. Matravers' clear, cold voice, although scarcely raised above the pitch of ordinary conversation, had penetrated to its furthest corner.

"And if I did, sir! What——"

"These gentlemen will bear me witness that you did say so?" Matravers interrupted



"'I am compelled to tell you, and these gentlemen, that your statement is a lie.'"

calmly. "I regret to have to use unpleasant language, Mr. Thorndyke, but I am compelled to tell you, and these gentlemen, that your statement is a lie!"

Thorndyke was a florid and a puffy man. The veins upon his temples stood out like whipcord. He was not a pleasant sight to look upon.

"What do you mean, sir?" he spluttered. "The carriage was mine before she had it. Everybody recognises it."

"Exactly. The carriage was yours. You intended every one to recognise it. But you have omitted to state, both here and in other places, that the lady bought that carriage from you for two hundred and sixty guineas—a good deal more than its worth, I should imagine. You heard her say that she was thinking of buying a victoria, and you offered her yours—pressed her to buy it. It was too small for your horses, you said, and you were hard up.

You even had it sent round to her stables without her consent. I have heard this story before, sir, and I have furnished myself with proofs of its falsehood. This, gentlemen," he added, drawing some papers from his pocket, "is Mr. Thorndyke's receipt for the two hundred and sixty guineas for a victoria, signed, as you will see, in his own handwriting, and here is the lady's cheque with Mr. Thorndyke's endorsement, cancelled and paid."

The papers were handed round. Thorndyke picked up his hat, but Matravers barred his egress.

"With regard to the insinuation which you coupled with your falsehood," he continued, "both are equally and absolutely false. I know her to be a pure and upright woman. A short time ago you took advantage of your position to make certain cowardly and disgraceful propositions to her, since when her doors have been closed upon

you! I would have you know, sir, and remember, that the honour of that lady, whom last night I asked to be my wife, is as dear to me as my own, and if you dare now, or at any future time, to slander her, I shall treat you as you deserve. You can go."

"And be very careful, sir," thundered the old Earl of Ellesmere, veteran member of the club, "that you never show your face inside these doors again, or, egad, I'm an old man, but I'll kick you out myself."

Thorndyke left the room amidst a chilling and unsympathetic silence. As soon as he could get away, Matravers followed him. There was a strange pain at his heart, a sense of intolerable depression had settled down upon him. After all, what good had he done? Only a few more days and her name, which for the moment he had cleared, would be besmirched in earnest. His impeachment

of Thorndyke would sound to these men then like mock heroics. There would be no one to defend her any more. There would be no defence. For ever in the eyes of all these people she was doomed to become one of the Magdalens of the world.

* * * * *

It seemed a very unreal London through which Matravers was whirled on his way from the club to Paddington. But before a third of the distance was accomplished, there was a sudden check. A little boy, who had wandered from his nurse in crossing the road, narrowly escaped being run over by a carriage and pair, only to find himself knocked down by the shaft of Matravers' hansom. There was a cry, and the driver pulled his horse on to her haunches, but apparently just a second too late. With

a sickening sense of horror, Matravers saw the little fellow literally under the horse's feet, and heard his shrill cry of terror.

He leaped out, and was the first to pick the child up, immeasurably relieved to find that after all he was not seriously hurt. His clothes were torn, and his hands were scratched, and there, apparently, the mischief ended. Matravers lifted him into the cab, and turned to the frightened nurse-girl for the address.

"Nine, Greenfield Gardens, West Kensington, sir," she told him; "and please tell the master it wasn't my fault. He is so venturesome, I can't control him nohow. His name is Drage—Freddy Drage, sir."

And then once more Matravers felt that strange dizziness which had come to him earlier in the day. Again he had that curious sense of moving in a dream, as though he had, indeed, become part of an

unreal and shadowy world. The renewed motion of the cab as they drove back again along Pall Mall, recalled him to himself. He leaned back and looked at the boy steadily.

Yes, they were her eyes. There was no doubt about it. The little fellow, not in the least shy, and, in fact, now become rather proud of his adventure, commenced to prattle very soon. Matravers interrupted him with a question,—

"Won't your mother be frightened to see you like this?" The child stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"Why, mammy ain't there," he exclaimed. "Mammy went away ever so long ago. I don't think she's dead, though, 'cos daddy wouldn't let me talk about her, only just lately, since he was ill. You see," he went on with an explanatory wave of the hand, "daddy's been a very bad man. He's better now—leastways, he ain't so bad as he was;

but I 'spect that's why mammy went away. Don't you?"

"I daresay, Freddy," Matravers answered softly.

"We're getting very near now," Freddy remarked, looking over the apron of the cab. "My! won't dada be surprised to see me drive up in a cab with you! I hope he's at the window!"

"Will your father be at home now?" Matravers asked.

Freddy stared at him.

"Why, of course! Dad's always at home! Is my face very buggy? Don't rub it any more, please. That's Jack Mason over there! I play with him. I want him to see me. Hullo! Jack," he shouted, leaning out of the cab, "I've been run over, right over, face all buggy. Look at it! Hands too," spreading them out. "He's a nice boy," Freddy continued as the cab turned a corner, "but he can't run near so fast

as me, and he's lots older. Hullo! here we are!" kicking vigorously at the apron.

Matravers looked up in surprise. They had stopped short before a long row of shabby-genteel houses in the outskirts of Kensington. He took the boy's outstretched hand and pushed open the gate. The door was open, and Freddy dragged him into a room on the ground floor.

A man was lying on a sofa before the window, wrapped in an untidy dressing-gown, and with the lower part of his body covered up with a rug. His face, fair and florid, with more than a suggestion of coarseness in the heavy jaw and thick lips, was drawn and wrinkled as though with pain. His lips wore an habitually peevish expression. He did not offer to rise when they came in. Matravers was thankful that Freddy spared him the necessity of immediate speech. He had recognised in a moment

the man who had sat alone night after night in the back seats of the New Theatre, whose slow drawn-out cry of agony had so curiously affected him on that last night of her performance. He recognised, too, the undergraduate of his college sent down for flagrant misbehaviour, the leader of a set whom he himself had denounced as a disgrace to the University. And this man was her husband!

"Daddy," the boy cried, dropping Matravers' hand and running over to the couch, "I've been run over by a hansom cab, and I'm all buggy, but I ain't hurt, and this gentleman brought me home. Daddy can't get up, you know," Freddy explained; "his legs is bad."

"Run over, eh!" exclaimed the man on the couch. "It's like that girl's damned carelessness."

He patted the boy's head, not unkindly, and Matravers found words.

"My cab unfortunately knocked your little boy down near Trafalgar Square, but I am thankful to say that he was not hurt. I thought that I had better bring him straight home, though, as he has had a roll in the dust."

At the sound of Matravers' voice, the man started and looked at him earnestly. A dull red flush stained his cheeks. He looked away.

"It was very good of you, Mr. Matravers," he said. "I can't think what the girl could have been about."

"I did not see her until after the accident. I am glad that it was no worse," Matravers answered. "You have not forgotten me, then?"

John Drage shook his head.

"No, sir," he said. "I have not forgotten you. I should have known your voice anywhere. Besides, I knew that you were in London. I saw you at the New Theatre."



"At the sound of Matravers' voice the man started and looked at him earnestly."

There was a short silence. Matravers glanced around the room with an inward shiver. The usual horrors of a suburban parlour were augmented by a general slovenliness, and an obvious disregard for any sort of order.

"I am afraid, Drage," he said gently, "that things have not gone well with you."

"You are quite right," the man answered bitterly. "They have not! They have gone very wrong indeed; and I have no one to blame but myself."

"I am sorry," Matravers said. "You are an invalid, too, are you not?"

"I am worse than an invalid," the man on the couch groaned. "I am a prisoner on my back, most likely for ever; curse it! I have had a paralytic stroke. I can't think why I couldn't die! It's hard lines! — damned hard lines! I wish I were dead twenty times a day! I am alone here from

morning to night, and not a soul to speak to. If it wasn't for Freddy I should jolly soon end it!"

"The little boy's mother?" Matravers ventured, with bowed head.

"She left me—years ago. I don't know that I blame her, particularly. Sit down, if you will, for a bit. I never have a visitor, and it does me good to talk."

Matravers took the only unoccupied chair, and drew it back a little into the darker part of the room.

"You remember me then, Drage," he remarked. "Yet it is a long time since our college days."

"I knew you directly I heard your voice, sir," the man answered. "It seemed to take me back to a night many years ago—I want you to let me remind you of it. I should like you to know that I never forgot it. We were at St. John's then; you were right above me—in a different world altogether. You

were a leader amongst the best of them, and I was a hanger-on amongst the worst. You were in with the gentlemen set and the reading set. Neither of them would have anything to do with me—and they were quite right. I was what they thought me—a cad. I'd no head for work, and no taste for anything worth doing, and I wasn't a gentleman, and hadn't the sense to behave like one. I'd no right to have been at the University at all, but my poor old dad would have me go. He had an idea that he could make a gentleman of me. It was a mistake!"

Ma[illegible]avers moved slightly in his chair,—he was suffering tortures.

"Is it worth while recalling all these things?" he asked quietly. "Life cannot be a success for all of us; yet it is the future, and not the past."

"I have no future," the man interrupted doggedly; "no future here, or in any other

place. I have got my deserts. I wanted to remind you of that night when you came to see me in my rooms, after I'd been sent down for being drunk. I suppose you were the first gentleman who had ever crossed my threshold, and I remember wondering what on earth you'd come for! You didn't lecture me, and you didn't preach! You came and sat down and smoked one of my cigars, and talked just as though we were friends, and tried to make me see what a fool I was. It didn't do much good in the end—but I never forgot it. You shook hands with me when you left, and for once in my life I was ashamed of myself."

"I am sorry," Matravers said with an effort, "that I did not go to see you oftener."

Drage shook his head.

"It was too late then! I was done for, —done for as far as Oxford was concerned. But that was only the beginning. I might

easily have picked up if I'd had the pluck! The dad forgave me, and made me a partner in the business before he died. I was a rich man, and I might have been a millionaire; instead of that I was a damned fool! I can't help swearing! you mustn't mind, sir! Remember what I am! I don't swear when Freddy's in the room, if I can help it. I went the pace, drank, kept women, and all the rest of it. My wife found me out and went away. I ain't saying a word against her. She was a good woman, and I was a bad man, and she left me! She was right enough! I wasn't fit for a decent woman to live with. All the same, I missed her; and it was another kick down Hellward for me when she went. I got desperate then; I took to drink worse than ever, and I began to let my business go and speculate. You wouldn't know anything of the city, sir; but I can tell you this, when a cool chap with all his wits about him starts speculating outside

his business, it's touch and go with him; when a chap in the state I was in goes for it, you can spell the result in four letters! It's R U I N, ruin! That's what it meant for me. I lost two hundred thousand pounds in three years, and my business went to pot too. Then I had this cursed stroke, and here I am! I may stick on for years, but I shall never be able to earn a penny again. Where Freddy's schooling is to come from, or how we are to live, I don't know!"

"I am very sorry," Matravers said gently. "Have you no friends then, or relations who will help you?"

"Not a damned one," growled the man on the couch. "I had plenty of pals once, only too glad to count themselves John Drage's friends; but where they are now I don't know. They seem to have melted away. There's never a one comes near me. I could do without their money or their help, somehow, but it's damned hard to lie here

for ever and have not one of 'em drop in just now and then for a bit of a talk and a cheering word. That's what gives me the blues! I always was fond of company; I hated being alone, and it's like hell to lie here day after day and see no one but a cross landlady and a miserable servant girl. Lately, I can't bear to be alone with Freddy. He's so damned like his mother, you know. It brings a lump in my throat. I wouldn't mind so much if it were only myself. I've had my cake! But it's rough on the boy!"

"It is rough on the boy, and it is rough on you," Matravers said kindly. "I wonder you have never thought of sending him to his mother! She would surely like to have him!"

The man's face grew black.

"Not till I'm dead," he said doggedly. "I don't want him set against me! He's all I've got! I'm going to keep him for a bit

It ought not to be so difficult for us to live. If only I could get down to the city for a few hours!"

"Could not a friend there do some good for you?" Matravers asked.

"Of course he could," Mr. Drage answered eagerly; "but I haven't got a friend. See here!"

He took a little account book from under his pillow, and with trembling fingers thrust it before his visitor.

"You see all these amounts. They are all owing to me from those people—money lent, and one thing and another. There is an envelope with bills and I O U's. They belong to me, you understand," he said, with a sudden touch of dignity. "I never failed! My business had to be stopped when I was taken ill, but there was enough to pay everybody. Now some of these amounts have never been collected. If I could see these people myself, they would



"'You mean this!' he cried thickly. 'Say it again—quick!'"

pay, or if I could get a friend whom I could trust! But there isn't a man comes near me!"

"I—am not a business man," Matravers said slowly; "but if you cared to explain things to me, I would go into the city and see what I could do."

The man raised himself on his elbow and gazed at his visitor open-mouthed.

"You mean this!" he cried thickly. "Say it again,—quick! You mean it!"

"Certainly," Matravers answered. "I will do what I can."

John Drage did not doubt his good fortune for a moment. No one ever looked into Matravers' face and failed to believe him.

"I—I'll thank you some day," he murmured. "You've done me up! Will you—shake hands?"

He held out a thin white hand. Matravers took it between his own.

In a few moments they were absorbed in figures and explanations. Finally the little book was passed over to Matravers' keeping.

"I will see what I can do," he said quietly. "Some of these accounts should certainly be recovered. I will come down and let you know how I have got on."

"If you would! If you don't mind! And, I wonder,—do you take a morning paper? If so, will you bring it when you've done with it, or an old one will do? I can't read anything but newspapers; and lately I haven't dared to spend a penny,—because of Freddy, you know! It's so cursed lonely!"

"I will come, and I will bring you something to read," Matravers promised. "I must go now!"

John Drage held out his hand wistfully.

"Good-bye," he said. "You're a good man! I wish I'd been like you. It's an odd

thing for me to say, but—God bless you, sir——."

Matravers stood on the doorstep with his watch in his hand. It was half-past three. There was just time to catch the four-thirty from Waterloo! For a moment the little street faded away from before his eyes! He saw himself at his journey's end! Berenice was there to meet him! A breath of the country came to him on the breeze—a breath of sweet-smelling flowers, and fresh moorland air, and the low murmur of the blue sea. Yes, there was Berenice, with her dark hair blowing in the wind, and that look of passionate peace in her pale, tired face! Her arms were open, wide open! She had been weary so long! The struggle had been so hard! and he, too, was weary——

He started! He was still on the doorstep! Freddy was drumming on the pane, and behind, there was a man lying on the couch,

with his face buried in his hands. He waved his hand and descended the steps firmly.

"Back to my rooms, 147, Piccadilly," he told the cabman. "I shall not be going away to-day.'

CHAPTER XIV

A LETTER

A MAN wrote it, from his little room in the heart of London, whilst night faded into morning. He wrote it with leaden heart and unwilling mechanical effort—wrote it as a man might write his own doom. Every fresh sentence, which stared up at him from the closely-written sheets seemed like another landmark in his sad descent from the pinnacles of his late wonderful happiness down into the black waters of despair. When he had finished, and the pen slipped from his stiff, nerveless fingers, there were lines and marks in his face which had never been there before, and which could never altogether pass away. . . . A

woman read it, seated on a shelving slant of moorland with the blue sky overhead, and the soft murmur of the sea in her ears, and the sunlight streaming around her. When she had finished, and the letter had fallen to her side, crushed into a shapeless mass, the light had died out of the sky and the air, and the song of the birds had changed into a wail. And this was what the man had said to the woman:—

"Berenice, I have had a dream! I dreamed that I was coming to you, that you and I were together somewhere in a new world, where the men were gods and the women were saints, where the sun always shone, and nothing that was not pure and beautiful had any place! And now I am awake, and I know that there is no such world.

"You and I are standing on opposite sides of a deep, dark precipice. I may not come to you! You must not come to me.



" The light had died out of the sky and the air, and the song of the birds had changed into a wail."

"I have thought over this matter with all the seriousness which befits it. You will never know how great and how fierce the struggle has been. I am feeling an older and a tired man. But now that is all over! I have crossed the Rubicon! The mists have rolled away, and the truth is very clear indeed to me! I shudder when I think to what misery I might have brought you, if I had yielded to that sweetest and most fascinating impulse of my life, which bade me accept your sacrifice and come to you. Berenice, you are very young yet, and you have woven some new and very beautiful fancies which you have put into a book, and which the world has found amusing! To you alone they have become the essence of your life: they have become by constant contemplation a part of yourself. Out of the greatness of your heart you do not fear to put them into practice! But, dear, you must find a new world to fit your fancies,

for the one in which we are forced to dwell, the world which, in theory, finds them delightful, would find another and an uglier word if we should venture upon their embodiment! After all we are creatures of this world, and by this world's laws we shall be judged. The things which are right are right, and the things which are pure are pure. Love is the greatest power in the world, but it cannot alter things which are unalterable.

"Once when I was climbing with a friend of mine in the Engadine, we saw a white flower growing virtually out of a cleft in the rocks, high above our heads. My friend was a botanist, and he would have that flower! I lay on my back and watched him struggle to reach it, watched him often slipping backwards, but gradually crawling nearer and nearer, until at last, breathless, with torn clothes and bleeding hands, he grasped the tiny blossom, and held it out to

me in triumph! Together we admired it ceaselessly as we retraced our steps. But as we left the high altitudes and descended into the valley, a change took place in the flower. Its petals drooped, its leaves shrank and faded. White became grey, the freshness which had been its chief beauty faded away with every step we took. My friend kept it, but he kept it with sorrow! It was no longer a beautiful flower.

"Berenice, you are that flower! You are beautiful, and pure, and strong! You think that you are strong enough to live in the lowlands, but you are not! No love of mine, changeless and whole as it must ever be, could keep your soul from withering in the nether land of sin! For it would be sin! In these days when you are young, when the fires of your enthusiasm are newly kindled, and the wings of your imagination have not been shorn, you may say to yourself that it is not sin! You may say that

love is the only true and sweet shrine before which we need keep our lives holy and pure, and that the time for regrets would never come!

"Illusion! I, too, have tried to reason with myself in this manner! I have tried passionately, earnestly, feverishly. I have failed! I cannot! No one can! I know that to you I seem to be writing like a Philistine, like a man of a generation gone by! You have filled your little world with new ideals, you have lit it with the lamp of love, and it all seems very real and beautiful to you! But some day, though the lamp may burn still as brightly as ever, a great white daylight will break in through the walls. You will see things that you have never seen before, and the light of that lamp will seem cold and dim and ghostly. Nothing, nothing can ever alter the fact that your husband lives, and that your little boy is growing up with a great void in his

heart. Some day he will ask for his mother; even now he may be asking for her! Berenice, would he ever look with large, indulgent eyes upon that little world of yours! Alas!

* * * * *

"I have read my letter over to myself, Berenice, and I fear that it must sound to you very commonplace, even perhaps cold! Yet, believe me when I tell you that I have passed through a very fire of suffering, and if I am calm now it is with the calm of an ineffable despair! In my life at Oxford, and later, here in London, women have never borne any share. Part of my scheme of living has been to regard them as something outside my little cycle, an influence great indeed, but one which had passed me by.

"Yet I am now one of the world's great sufferers, one of those who have found at

a

once their greatest joy linked with an unutterable despair. For I love you, Berenice! Never doubt it! Though I should never look upon your face again—which God in His mercy forbid—my love for you must be for ever a part and the greatest part of my life! Always remember that, I pray you!

"It seems strange to talk of one's plans with such a great, black cloud of sorrow filling the air! But the outward form of life does not change, even when the light has gone out and one's heart is broken! I have some work before me which I must finish; when it is over I shall go abroad! But that can wait! When you are back in London, send for me! I am schooling myself to meet a new Berenice—my friend! And I have something still more to say to you!

"MASTRAVERS."

CHAPTER XV

BENEFICENCE

THE week that followed the sending of his letter was, to Matravers, with his love for equable times and emotions, like a week in hell! He had set himself a task not easy even to an ordinary man of business, but to him trebly difficult and harassing. Day after day he spent in the city—a somewhat strange visitor there, with his grave, dignified manner and studied fastidiousness of dress and deportment. He was unversed in the ways of the men with whom he had to deal, and he had no commercial aptitude whatever. But in a quiet way he was wonderfully persistent, and he

succeeded better, perhaps, than any other emissary whom John Drage could have employed. The sum of money which he eventually collected amounted to nearly fifteen hundred pounds, and late one evening he started for Kensington with a bundle of papers under his arm and a cheque-book in his pocket.

It was his last visit,—at any rate, for the present,—he told himself with a sense of wonderful relief, as he walked through the Park in the gathering twilight. For of late, something in connection with his day's efforts had taken him every evening to the shabby little house at Kensington, where his coming was eagerly welcomed by the tired, sick man and the lonely boy. He had esteemed himself a man well schooled in all manner of self-control, and little to be influenced in a matter of duty by his personal likes and dislikes. But these visits were a torture to him! To sit and talk for hours

with a man, grateful enough, but peevish and commonplace, and with a curious lack of virility or self-reliance in his untoward circumstances, was trial enough to Matravers, who had been used to select his associates and associations with delicate and close care. But to remember that this man had been, and indeed was, the husband of Berenice, was madness! It was this man, whom at the best he could only regard with a kindly and gentle contempt, who stood between him and such surprising happiness. this man and the boy with his pale, serious face and dark eyes. And the bitterness of fate—for he never realized that it would have been possible for him to have acted otherwise—had made him their benefactor!

Just as he was leaving the Park he glanced up at the sound of a carriage passing him rapidly, and as he looked up he stood still! It seemed to him that life itself was standing still in his veins. Berenice had been

silent. There had come no word from her! But nothing so tragic, so horrible as this, had ever occurred to him! His heart had been full of black despair, and his days had been days of misery; but even the possibility of seeking for himself solace, by means not altogether worthy, had never dawned upon him. Nor had he dreamed it of her! Yet the man who waved his hand from the box-seat of the phaeton with a courtesy seemingly real, but, under the circumstances, brutally ironical, was Thorndyke, and the woman who sat by his side was Berenice!

The carriage passed on down the broad drive, and Matravers stood looking after it. Was it his fancy, or was that, indeed, a faint cry which came travelling through the dim light to his ears as he stood there under the trees—a figure turned to stone. A faint cry, or the wailing of a lost spirit! A sudden dizziness came over him, and he



" With his pocket-book in his hand he successfully underwent a searching cross-examination."

sat down on one of the seats close at hand. There was a singing in his ears, and a pain at his heart. He sat there with half-closed eyes, battling with his weakness.

Presently he got up, and continued his journey. He found himself on the doorstep of the shabby little house, and mechanically he passed in and told the story of his day's efforts to the man who welcomed him so eagerly. With his pocket-book in his hand he successfully underwent a searching cross-examination, faithfully recording what one man had said and what another, their excuses and their protestations. He made no mistakes, and his memory served him amply. But when he had come to the end of the list, and had placed the cheque-book in John Drage's fingers, he felt that he must get away. Even his stoical endurance had a measurable depth. But it was hard to escape from the man's most unwelcome gratitude. John Drage had not the tact to recognise in

his benefactor the man to whom thanks are hateful.

"And I had no claim upon you whatever!" the sick man wound up, half-breathless. "If you had cut me dead, after my Oxford disgrace, it would only have been exactly what I deserved. That's what makes it so odd, your doing all this for me. I can't understand it, I'm damned if I can!"

Matravers stood over him, a silent, unresponsive figure, seeking only to make his escape. With difficulty he broke in upon the torrent of words.

"Will you do me the favour, Mr. Drage," he begged earnestly, "of saying no more about it. Any man of leisure would have done for you what I have done. If you really wish to afford me a considerable happiness, you can do so."

"Anything in this world!" John Drage declared vehemently.

Matravers thought for a moment. The

proposition which he was about to make had been in his mind from the very first. The time had come now to put it into words.

"You must not be offended at what I am going to say," he began gently. "I am a rich man, and I have taken a great fancy to your boy. I have no children of my own; in fact, I am quite alone in the world. If you will allow me, I should like to undertake Freddy's education."

A light broke across the man's coarse face, momentarily transfiguring it. He raised himself on his elbow, and gazed at his visitor with eager scrutiny. Then he drew a deep sigh, and there were tears in his eyes. He did not say a word. Matravers continued.

"It will be a great pleasure for me," he said quietly. "What I propose is to invest a thousand pounds for that purpose in Freddy's name. In fact, I have taken the liberty of already doing it. The papers are here."

Matravers laid an envelope on the little table between them. Then he rose up.

"Will you forgive me now," he said, "if I hurry away. I will come and see you again, and we will talk this over more thoroughly."

And still John Drage said nothing, but he held out his hand. Matravers pressed the thin fingers between his own.

"You must see Freddy," he said eagerly. "I promised him that he should come in before you went."

But Matravers shook his head. There was a pain at his heart like the cutting of a knife.

"I cannot stay another instant," he declared. "Send Freddy over to my rooms any time. Let him come and have tea with me!"

Then they parted, and Matravers walked through a world of strange shadows to Berenice's house. Her maid, recognising

him, took him up to her room without ceremony. The door was softly opened and shut. He stood upon the threshold. For a moment everything seemed dark before him.

CHAPTER XVI

A PARTING

BERENICE seemed to dwell always in the twilight. At first Matravers thought that the room was empty, and he advanced slowly towards the window. And then he stopped short. Berenice was lying in a crumpled heap on the low couch, almost within touch of his hands. She was lying on her side, her supple figure all doubled up, and the folds of her loose gown flowing around her in wild disorder. Her face was half hidden in her clasped hands.

"Berenice," he cried softly.

She did not answer. She was asleep. He stood looking down upon her, his heart full of an infinite tenderness. She, too, had



"She, too, had suffered, then."

suffered, then. Her hair was in wild confusion, and there were marks of recent tears upon her pale cheeks. A little lace handkerchief had slipped from her fingers down on to the floor. He picked it up. It was wet! The glow of the heavily-shaded lamp was upon her clasped white fingers and her bowed head. He watched the rising and falling of her bosom as she slept. To him, so great a stranger to women and their ways, there was a curious fascination in all the trifling details of her toilette and person, the innate daintiness of which appealed to him with a very potent and insidious sweetness. Whilst she slept, he felt as one far removed from her. It was like a beautiful picture upon which he was gazing. The passion which had been raging within him like an autumn storm was suddenly stilled. Only the purely æsthetic pleasure of her presence and his contemplation of it remained. It seemed to him then that he

would have had her stay thus for ever! Before his fixed eyes there floated a sort of mystic dream. There was another world —was it the world of sleep or of death?— where they might join hands and dwell together in beautiful places, and there was no one, not even their consciences, to say them nay. The dust of earthly passion and sin and all the commonplace miseries of life, had faded for ever from their knowledge. It was their souls which had come together . . . and there was a wonderful peace.

Then she opened her eyes and looked up at him. There was no more dreaming! The old, miserable passion flooded his heart and senses. His feet were upon the earth again! The whole world of those strange, poignant sensations, stronger because of their late coming, welled up within him.

"Berenice!"

She was only half awake, and she held up her soft, white arms to him, gleaming

like marble through the lace of her wide sleeves. She looked up at him with the faint smile of a child.

"My love!"

He stooped down, and her arms closed around him like a soft yoke. But he kissed her forehead so lightly that she scarcely realized that this was almost his first caress.

"Berenice, you have been angry with me!"

She sat up, and the lamplight fell upon his face.

"You have been ill," she cried in a shocked tone.

"It is nothing. I am well. But to-night—I had a shock; I saw you with—Mr Thorndyke!"

Her eyes met his. The hideous phantom which had been dogging his steps was slain. He was ashamed of that awful but nameless fear.

"It is true. Mr. Thorndyke has offered me an apology, which I am forced to believe

sincere. He has asked me to be his wife! I was sorry for him."

"He is a bad man! He has spoken ill of you! He has already a wife!"

"I am glad of it. I can obey my instincts now, and see him no more. Personally he is distasteful to me! I had an idea he was honest! It is nothing!"

She dismissed the subject with a wave of the hand. To her it was altogether a minor matter. Then she looked at him.

"Well!"

"You never answered my letter."

"No, there was no answer. I came back."

"You did not let me know."

"You will find a message at your rooms when you get back."

He walked up and down the room. He knew at once that all he had done hitherto had been in vain. The battle was still before him. She sat and watched him with

an inscrutable smile. Once as he passed her, she laid her hand upon his arm. He stopped at once.

"Your white flower was born to die and to wither," she said. "A night's frost would have killed it as surely as the lowland air. It is like these violets." She took a bunch from her bosom. "This morning they were fresh and beautiful. Now they are crushed and faded! Yet they have lived their life."

She threw them down upon the floor.

"Do you think a woman is like that?" she said softly. "You are very, very ignorant! She has a soul."

He held out his hand.

"A soul to keep white and pure. A soul to give back—to God!"

Again she smiled at him slowly, and shook her dark head. "You are like a child in some things! You have lived so long amongst the dry bones of scholarship, that you have lost your touch upon human-

ity. And of us women, you know—so very little. You have tried to understand us from books. How foolish! You must be my disciple, and I will teach you."

"It is not teaching," he cried; "it is temptation."

She turned upon him with a gleam of passion in her eyes.

"Temptation!" she cried. "There spoke the whole selfishness of the philosopher, the dilettante in morals! What is it that you fear? I will tell you. It is the besmirchment of your own ideals, your own little code framed and moulded with your own hands. What do you know of sin or of purity, you, who have held yourself aloof from the world with a sort of delicate care, as though you, forsooth, were too precious a thing to be soiled with the dust of human passion and human love! That is where you are all wrong. That is where you make your great mistake. You have judged

without experience. You speak of a soul which may be stained with sin; you have no more knowledge than the Pharisees of old what constitutes sin. Love can never stain anything! Love that is constant and true and pure is above the marriage laws of men; it is above your little self-constructed ideals; it is a thing of Heaven and of God! You wrote to me like a child,—and you are a child, for until you have learnt what love is, you are without understanding."

Suddenly her outstretched hands dropped to her side. Her voice became soft and low; her dark eyes were dimmed.

"Come to me, and you shall know. I will show you in what narrow paths you have been wandering. I will show you how beautiful a woman's love can make your life!"

"If we can love and be pure," he said hoarsely, "what is sin? What is that?"

He was standing by the window, and he pointed westwards with shaking finger. The roar of Piccadilly and Regent Street came faintly into the little room. She understood him.

"You have a great deal to learn, dear," she whispered softly. "Remember this first, and before all, Love can sanctify everything."

"But they too loved in the beginning!'

She shook her head.

"That they never could have done. Love is eternal. If it fades or dies, then it never was love. Then it was sin."

"But those poor creatures! How are they to tell between the true love and the false?"

She stamped her foot, and a quiver of passion shook her frame.

"We are not talking about them. We are talking about ourselves! Do you doubt your love or mine?"

"I cannot," he answered. "Berenice!"

"Yes!"

"Did you ever tell—your husband that you loved him?"

"Never!"

"Did he love you?"

"I believe, so far as he knew how to love anything,—he did."

"And now?"

She waved her hand impatiently.

"He has forgotten. He was shallow, and he was fond of life. He has found consolation long ago. Do not talk of him. Do not dare to speak of him again! Oh, why do you make me humble myself so?"

"He may not have forgotten. He may have repented. He may be longing for you now,—and suffering. Should we be sinless then?"

She swept from her place, and stood before him with flashing eyes.

"I forbid you to remind me of my shame.

I forbid you to remind me that I, too, like those poor women on the street, have been bought and sold for money! I have worked out my own emancipation. I am free. It was while I was living with him as his wife that I sinned,—for I hated him! Speak to me no more of that time! If you cannot forget it, you had better go!"

He stretched out his hands and held hers tightly.

"Berenice, if you were alone in the world, and there was some great barrier to our marriage, I would not hesitate any longer. I would take you to myself. Don't think too hardly of me. I am like a man who is denying himself heaven. But your husband lives. You belong to him. You do not know whether he is in prosperity, or whether he has forgotten. You do not know whether he has repented, or whether his life is still such as to justify your taking the law into your own hands, and forsaking

him for ever. Listen to me, dear! If you will find out these things, if you can say to yourself and to me, and to your conscience, 'he has found happiness without me, he has ignored and forgotten the tie between us, he does not need my sympathy, or my care, or my companionship,' then I will have no more scruples. Only let us be sure that you are morally free from that man."

She wrenched her hands away from his. There was a bright, red spot of colour flaring on her cheeks. Her eyes were on fire.

"You are mad!" she cried; "you do not love me! No man can know what love is who talks about doubts and scruples like you do! You are too cold and too selfish to realize what love can be! And to think that I have stopped to reason, to reason with you! Oh! my God! What have I done to be humbled like this?"

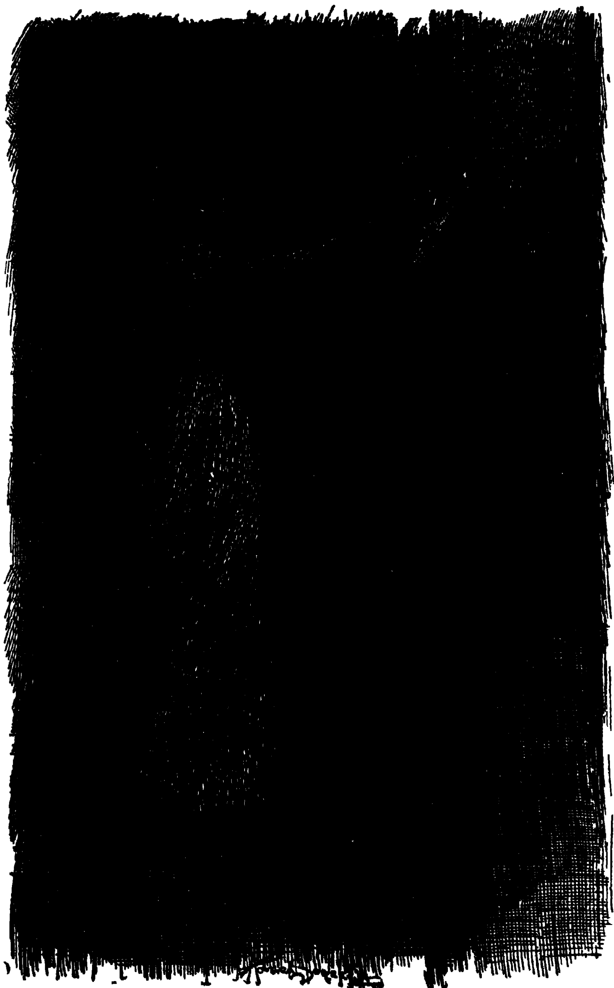
"Berenice!"

"Leave me! Don't come near me any more! I shall thrust you out of my life! You never loved me! I could not have loved you! Go away! It has been a hideous mistake!"

"Berenice!"

"My God! Will you leave me?" she moaned. "You are driving me mad! I hate you!"

Her white hand flashed out into the darkness, as though she would have struck him! He bowed his head and went



"Her white hand flashed out into the darkness, as though she would have struck him!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE REAL SACRIFICE

MATRAVERS knew after that night that his was a broken life. Any future such as he had planned for himself of active, intellectual toil had now, he felt, become impossible. His ideals were all broken down. A woman had found her way in between the joints of an armour which he had grown to believe impenetrable, and henceforth life was a wreck. The old quiet stoicism, which had been the inner stimulus of his career, was a thing altogether overthrown and impotent. He was too old to reconstruct life anew; the fragments were too many, and the wreck too complete. Only his philosophy showed him very plainly what the end must be. Across

the sky of his vision it seemed to be written in letters of fire.

Early in the morning, having made his toilette as usual with a care almost fastidious, he went out into the sunlit streets, moving like a man in a deep dream amongst scenes which had become familiar to him day by day. At his lawyer's he made his will, and signed it, thankful for once for his great loneliness, insomuch as there was no one who could call the disposal of his property to a stranger an injustice—for he had left all to little Freddy, left it to him because of his mother's eyes, as he thought with a faint smile. Then he called at his publisher's and at the office of a leading review to which he was a regular contributor, telling them to expect no more work from him for a while; he was going abroad to take a long-earned holiday. He lunched at his club, speaking in a more than usually friendly manner to the few men with whom at times he had

found it a pleasure to associate, and finally, with that sense of unreality growing stronger and stronger, he found himself once more in the Park, in his usual chair, looking out with the same keen sympathy upon the intensely joyous, beautiful phase of life which floated around him. The afternoon breeze rustled pleasantly among the cool green leaves above his head, and the sunlight slanted full across the shaded walk. On every hand were genial voices, cordial greetings, and light farewells. With a sense almost of awe, he thought of the days when he had sat there waiting for her carriage, that he might look for a few moments upon that pale-faced woman, whose influence over him seemed already to have commenced before even any words had passed between them. He sat there, gravely acknowledging the salutes of those with whom he was acquainted, wearing always the same faint and impenetrable smile — wonderful mask of a broken heart. And still the memo-

ries came surging into his brain. He thought of that grey morning when he had sat there alone, oppressed by some dim premonitions of the tragedy amongst whose shadows he was already passing, so that even the wind which had followed the dawn, and shaken the raindrops down upon him, had seemed to carry upon its bosom wailing cries and sad human voices. As the slow moments passed along, he found himself watching for her carriage, with some remnant of the old wistfulness. But it never came, and for that he was thankful.

At last he rose, and walked leisurely back to his rooms. He gave orders to his servant to pack all his things for a journey; then, for the last time, he stood up in the midst of his possessions, looking around him with a vague sorrowfulness at the little familiar objects which had become dear to him, both by association and by reason of a certain sense of companionship which he had always been

able to feel for beautiful things, however inanimate. It was here that he had come when he had first left Oxford, full of certain definite ambitions, and with a mind fixed at least upon living a serene and well-ordered life. He had woven many dreams within these four walls. How far away those days now seemed to be from him! He would never dream any more; for him the world's great dream was very close at hand.

He poured himself out a glass of wine from a quaintly cut decanter, and set it down on his writing-desk, emptying into it with scrupulous care the contents of a little packet which he had been carrying all day in his waistcoat pocket. He paused for a moment before taking up his pen, to move a little on one side the deep blue china bowl of flowers which, summer and winter alike, stood always fresh upon his writing-table. To-day it chanced, by some irony of fate, that they were roses, and a swift flood of memories

rushed into his tingling senses as the perfume of the creamy blossoms floated up to him.

He set his teeth, and, taking out some paper began to write.

"Berenice, farewell! To-night I am going on a very long journey, to a very far land. You and I may never meet again, and so, farewell! Farewell to you, Berenice, whom I have loved, and whom I dearly love. You are the only woman who has ever wandered into my little life to teach me the great depths of human passion—and you came too late. But that was not your fault.

"For what I am doing, do you, at least, not blame me. If there were a single person in the world dependent upon me, or to whom my death would be a real loss, I would remain. But there is no one. And, whereas alive I can do you no good, dead I may! Berenice, your husband lives — in suffering and in poverty; your husband and your little

boy. Freddy has looked at me out of your dark eyes, my love, and whilst I live I can never forget it. I hold his little hands, and I look into his pure, childish face, and the great love which I bear for his mother seems like an unholy thing. Leave your husband out of the question — put every other consideration on one side, Freddy's eyes must have kept us apart for ever.

"And, dear, it is your boy's future, and the care of your stricken husband, which must bring you into closer and more intimate touch with the vast world of human sorrows. Love is a sacrifice, and life is a sacrifice. I know, and that knowledge is the comfort of my last sad night on earth, that you will find your rightful place amongst her toiling daughters. And it is because there is no fitting place for me by your side that I am very well content to die. For myself, I have well counted the cost. Death is an infinite compulsion. Our little lives are but the veriest

trifle in the scale of eternity. Whether we go into everlasting sleep, or into some other mystic state, a few short years here more or less are no great matter, Berenice."

Again there came that curious pain at his heartstrings, and the singing in his ears. The pen slipped from his fingers; his head drooped.

"Berenice!" he whispered. "Berenice!"

* * * * *

And as though by a miracle she heard him, for she was close at hand. Whilst he had been writing, the door had been softly opened and closed, a tall, grey-mantled figure stood upon the threshold. It was Berenice!

"May I come in?" she cried softly. Her face was flushed, and her cheeks were wet, but a smile was quivering upon her lips.

He did not answer. She came into the room, close to his side. Her fingers clasped

the hand which was hanging over the side of his chair. The lamp had burnt very low; she could scarcely see his face.

"Dear, I have come to you," she murmured. "I am sorry. I want you to forgive me. I do love you! you know that I love you!"

The pressure of her fingers upon his hand was surely returned. She stood up, and her cloak slipped from her shoulders on to the floor.

"Why don't you speak to me? Don't you hear? Don't you understand? I have come to you! I will not be sent away! It is too late! My carriage brought me here. I have told my people that I shall not be returning! Come away with me to-night! Let us start now! Listen! it is too late to draw back! Every one knows that I have come to you! We shall be so happy! Tell me that you are glad!"

There was no answer. He did not move.

She came close to him, so that her cheek almost touched his.

"Tell me that you are glad," she begged. "Don't argue with me any more. If you do, I shall stop your mouth with kisses. I am not like you, dear! I must have love! I cannot live alone any longer! I have touched the utmost limits of my endurance! I *will* stay with you! You *shall* love me! Listen! If you do not, I swear—but no! You will save me from that! Oh, I know that you will! But don't argue with me! Words are so cold, and I am a woman—and I must love and be loved, or I shall die . . . Ah!"

She started round with a little scream. Her eyes, frightened and dilated, were fixed upon the door. On the threshold a little boy was standing in his night-shirt, looking at her with dark, inquiring eyes.

"I want Mr. Matravers, if you please," he said deliberately. "Will you tell him? He

don't know that I'm here yet! He will be so surprised! Charlie Dunlop—that's where I live—has the fever, and dad sent me here with a letter, but Mr. Matravers was out when we came, and nurse put me to bed. Now she's gone away, and I'm so lonely. Is he asleep? Please wake him, and tell him."

She turned up the lamp without moving her eyes from the little white-clad figure. A great trembling was upon her! It was like a voice from the shadows of another world. And Matravers, why did he not speak?

Slowly the lamp burned up She leaned forward. He was sitting with his head resting upon his hand, and the old, faint smile parting his lips. But he did not look up! He did not speak to her! He was sitting like a carved image!

"For God's sake speak to me!" she cried.

Then a certain rigidity in his posture

struck her for the first time, and she threw herself on the ground beside him with a cry of fear. She pressed her lips to his, chafed his cold hand, and whispered frantically in his ear! But there was no answer—there never could be any answer. Matravers was dead, and the wine-glass at his side was untasted.

Berenice did not faint! She did not even lose consciousness for a moment. Moaning softly to herself, but dry-eyed, she leaned over his shoulder and read the words which he had written to her, of which, indeed, the ink was scarcely dry. When she had finished, she took up the wine-glass in her own fingers, holding it so steadily that not a drop was spilt.

Here at last was the panacea she craved! The problem of her troubled life was so



"But there was no answer—there never could be any answer."

easily to be solved. Rest with the man she loved!

Her arms would fold around him as she sank to the ground. Perhaps he was already waiting for her somewhere—in one of those mystic worlds where the soul might shake itself free from this weary burden of human passions and sorrows. Her lips parted in a wonderful smile. She raised the glass!

There was a soft patter across the carpet, and a gentle tug at her dress.

"I am very cold," Freddy cried piteously, holding out a little blue foot from underneath his night-shirt. "If you don't want to wake Mr. Matravers, will you take me up to bed, please?"

Through a mist of sudden tears, she looked down into her boy's face. She drew a deep, quick breath—her fingers were suddenly nerveless. There was a great dull stain on the front of her dress, the wine-glass, shattered into many pieces, lay at her feet. She

fell on her knees, and with a little burst of passionate sobs took him into her arms.

There were grey hairs in the woman's head, although she was still quite young. A few yards ahead, the bath chair, wheeled by an attendant, was disappearing in the shroud of white mist, which had suddenly rolled in from the sea. But the woman lingered for a moment with her eyes fixed upon that dim, distant line, where the twilight fell softly upon the grey ocean. It was the single hour in the long day which she claimed always for her own—for it seemed to her in that mysterious stillness, when the shadows were gathering and the winds had dropped, that she could sometimes hear his voice. Perhaps, somewhere, he too longed for that hour—a dweller, it might be, in that wonderful spirit world of the unknown, of which he had spoken some-

times with a curiously grave solemnity. Her hands clasped the iron railing, a light shone for a moment in the pale, lined face turned so wistfully seawards!

Was it the low, sweet music of the sea, or was it indeed his voice in her ears, languorous and soft, long-travelled yet very clear. Somewhere at least he must know that hers had become at his bidding the real sacrifice! A smile transfigured her face! It was for this she had lived!

Then there came her summons. A querulous little cry reached her from the bath chair, drawn up on the promenade. She waved her hand cheerfully.

"I am coming," she cried; "wait for me!"

But her face was turned towards that dim, grey line of silvery light, and the wind caught hold of her words and carried them away over the bosom of the sea—upwards!

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